

A FROST ON MY FROLIC

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by

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CHAPTER I

TIME, 8.50; the season, Spring; the year, 1944; the sky, a quiet blue; the hills all around us and stirring with change; the only sounds, boys' feet and a solitary bell.

My friend Spencer and I walk up the hill towards the school. We bend forward to make the hill seem less steep. This is our fifth year at the school and our thoughts about this slope have grown more plentiful and profound with the passing of each month. No doubt the governing body and their friends have heard of such schools as Harrow which are also built on hills, and thought, by hoisting this one on its present perch, to give Mynydd Coch, which is as rough a place as you will find in this sector, a better tone. But those young elements at Harrow get more regular injections of self-esteem and more building foods than we do at Mynydd Coch. We hear also that they do not go home at the end of each school day but sleep in the buildings and do not have two furlongs of uphill walking to get to their lessons, and that must be an advantage from the point of view of turning up fresh in the morning. We climb and a lot of us get bent nearly double in the process, for whatever substance it is that keeps spines straight seems to find it easy to give up the ghost in this area.

Off and on I become discouraged. One morning, between the gradient, a poor breakfast of soya sausage, a long and lowering talk with my old man, who was in sad vein, and a lot of thought going on in my head, my nose began rubbing against the ground. I looked as if I were sniffing my way upward and I had a very fundamental feeling about me, a feeling of being on the outer rim of human experience. A couple of dogs joined in and I thought that was stretching out the rim a little too far and I straightened up just enough to repeat a few of the usual reasons for keeping dogs in their places. I am careful now about pointing my nose in the right evolved direction.

"We'll have to hurry," says Spence, but I find it hard to quicken my pace. My senses dip as I try to spurt. Two nights ago, I firewatched in the school. We do this duty in shifts of five and it should come around about once a fortnight, but we elements who are short of money and have no great interest in sleep as such take on the turns of watchers who are indifferent to the issue of whether or not the school is burned down or whose parents think much of them and fear the effects of sleeping in the draughty wash-up where the bunks are arranged. This means we make some extra pocket money, and also that we have lapsed into a persistent stupor which will force us soon or late to work out a new set of sensibilities altogether. We are beginning to find that life does not look very much different from the inside of a moderate coma, once you get used to the annoyed or weary look people put on when they are repeating a question to you for the sixth or seventh time. Apart from that, this duty of guarding the school has put us to no inconvenience. Mynydd Coch has never been attacked and the only time we ever sprang to attention around the stirrup pump was when one of our number dropped a lighted cigarette on the blankets of the bunk beneath. But two nights ago my friend Wilfie kept me awake until three talking about poetry and the way his nerves have of going around in circles. If you ever see a clutch of lurching, giddy things sprawling across your path send them back here, for they will be the nerves of Wilfie. It was his blankets on which Benny Turner dropped the cigarette on that single night of drenched excitement when we thought we had moved into the front line. Wilfie was so upset that when we handed him his helmet he just whimpered and sat on it and it looked the most natural thing in the world for him to do.

I have never seen anyone like Wilfie for being afraid, and the long list of such post-war antics as recruiting the atom into the removal business, the dwindling of food supplies, and the insurgence of Colonial peoples is not going to make him any easier about the feel of this earth. His father must have been some kind of a shudder. He meets you with a distant shivering laugh that is uncanny on any ear which is new to Wilfie's

family. He gets no peace and if he starts analysing this business of his dreads, which run the best-stocked mental stall in Mynydd Coch, when I am anywhere near him, I get no sleep. I can see Wilfie now. He is about fifty yards ahead of us on the pavement. He is pretty tall and thin. He is wearing a long bleached mackintosh. He is wedded to this article for we never see him out of it. It has him in some kind of spell, an evil trance. Between the look, a feeble, dying, yellow look, of his coat, the bend in his back which comes from his passage up the slope and Wilfie's being by nature of a meditative turn, he would pass for some kind of a high priest, if there were still any sect in Mynydd Coch with enough put away in the bank or coming in from the wills of dead members to afford such an official. This mackintosh he wears once belonged to his Uncle Ernest, one of the tallest and most oppressed-looking voters ever produced in this division. He was stooped into exactly the same shape as a question mark, with lightish socks always glaring between the top of his black boots and the bottoms of his short black trousers to create the impression of the dot. When he added that mackintosh to his existing effects he looked so much more like a question people actually began answering him as well, and this worried and distressed Uncle Ernest, who was never the type of curious man who made inquiries out of turn. Wilfie's coat should have been shortened but his mother thinks he has feet more of growth in him yet and that one day he will dwarf Uncle Ernest. Wilfie has to walk in a very cautious, nimble-footed way to avoid being jerked headlong when he trips over the hem of this garment. This makes him even more fidgety and depressed than nature meant, and he is helped by the crowds of young scholars who come around him and ask him for a wafer. That is their way of saying that Wilfie, with this coat hanging from him, looks like one of those ice cream sellers from the plain of Lombardy who ride around Mynydd Coch in summer looking fresh, clean and busy.

"Come on," says Spence. "We'll be late again for sure."

"Take it easy. You're too zealous of any sense, boy."

Spence is afraid of being late. The reason is that he and I are

prefects, even though prefects of the second grade only. We are given easier and less responsible tasks, such as telling kids always to warm their fingers before choking a neighbour. It is our first job in the morning to stand at the side gate of the school looking officious and solemn and booking kids who come late. When we do that we damn them to detention. We do it with poor hearts; we do not like this duty. Lower down the school we ourselves were late so often they dedicated a new detention book to us and we got into the way of moving smoothly into the detention room at the day's end without the fuss and bother of being booked. This saved a lot of clerical work and argument with the prefect in charge. But now we are on the right side of the book and most mornings we have to go without breakfast to be on the spot before our victims. We do not enjoy this responsibility. It cuts into us with a slow, cruel carefulness, like a file, and draws our blood. Spence and I are students of history and the more we have read of the darkling capers that have been coming in in a fat and rolling flood since they thought up towns and nations, the more we become convinced that such elements as prefects and such habits as putting the names of comrades into books with the idea of punishing them have lowered joy all round and helped create a fixed twilight condition in the human wits.

We are too shrinking for this job. Being prefects we also have to wear a thick yellow stripe in our caps. Mr. Rawlins, the teacher of biology and the most dynamic element in the school, thought that with the ordinary cap we had a very dun and undistinguished look, so in came this yellow, and ever since we have been walking about like a tribe of small sunsets. As most of the people in Mynydd Coch wear clothes that are either falling off or very drab this yellow stripe stands out like a flag pole and creates a lot of loose talk among the voters in our row, who live lives of essential shadow and have sucked up a chronic veneration for black from long intercourse with the chapels. These people are not on to the prefect system and are sure that the stripe means we have a disease or are being injected by some far-seeing element at the clinic to preserve us from one. Wilfie has often had his nerve fibres scraped by

having some neighbour standing near him in a public convenience grasp his arm and bring his attention to some striking poster about taking it in time and seeking private treatment. Things have been less sociable in every way since we put up this yellow. Also, we are miles too gullible to make anything but a ruin of this job at the side gate. We believe too many things and too many people ever to carve any kind of a niche at this game of authority. If you can believe that Mynydd Coch is really there you can believe anything and that is our trouble. Every tale of pathetic excuse shovelled up for us at the side gate has the pity running out of us in a sweat. Mr. Rawlins has noted this weakness and urges us to look at life with a grim sense of progressive purpose. He says that after the first flush of optimism and full employment after the armistice, there is bound to come a recession of social hope and a fresh injection of Spartan harshness. He tells us to get into hard training for success and integrity and to mean every frowning horrible minute of it. He tells us never to run short of pencils and to fill up the book. If Mr. Rawlins can import enough rock to get our hearts up to standard hardness, we might one day have the same kind of duty-sense that Moses must have had, and he will probably land us in pretty much the same barrage of storm and solitude on much the same peak of deathly bitterness. But Spencer and I, we wear Mr. Rawlins out faster than a treadmill. Our spirits have a jelly quality and the substance of them plomps swiftly back into shape once the compulsive finger has been lifted. We are soft. The rain or something has soaked right into our middles. We believe in a little comfort and leisure on the margin. We look hard at the mountains and the sky and cannot believe that the solemnity of our small faces will hold these things any more firmly in place.

We make a spurt and catch up with Wilfie. We find him muttering and holding a Bible in his right hand. He does not notice us. We think at first he must have religious mania. We have noticed his Uncle Ernest standing about with a group of Evangelists on the grass patch near the cinema in Mynydd Coch and we think that perhaps Wilf has taken over this tendency with the raincoat. There are lots of small religious

sects in Mynydd Coch, the Marchers, the Drummers and the Lookers who do even their shopping by scriptural injunction, and it is easy in an absent-minded moment to tip the time-spirit a jesting wink and dive into the undertow of one of these earnest swirls.

"What's up, Wilf?" asks Spence anxiously.

"I'm reading this morning, reading the scripture in hall."

"What's that to go so pale about?"

"It's not just the scripture. It's Rawlins."

We sympathise here. Mr. Rawlins it is who selects the pieces to be read and the boys to read them. Spencer and I were chosen for this job at the beginning of the year but Mr. Rawlins took one listen to our delivery, turned pale at the thought of paganism being spread into every corner and raved about the uncouthness of our intonation. He snatched the Bible from us and put us on permanent guard at the side gate where we have been ever since feeling just like trouble-makers expelled from Rome and sent to cool their seats with a spell alongside Offa on his dyke, having their urge to disharmony muted in contact with the Northern mists and a brush with the Picts. According to Mr. Rawlins we had stripped the reading of all sacredness. We were not aware of doing that. We were sorry to be denounced and sent forth as being inept in this field, for there is great joy and consolation to be found in standing up and uttering rich prose which has a way of preparing people for death and repentance and has nothing to do with such things as taxes, food and work. We can understand why there has been so much competition in the past for the honour of standing up in front of one's fellow men and reading out to them from a book which never fails to terrify or console. The trouble with Mr. Rawlins is that he has been against the Welsh accent ever since he attended a series of week-end schools with the Drama League. As far as Mr. Rawlins is concerned the League has carried on from where Edward the First left off. Phonologically Prince Llewellyn has been ambushed once again. Henry the Eighth was a beginner in this line in contrast with Mr. Rawlins and particularly he does not like the accent of the fringe in connection with Bible readings, on which he

puts great stock, being a lay preacher and an out-board motor on such bodies as the Y.M.C.A. He thinks that to get the full flavour of holiness from these readings the voice of the reader should be delicate, refined and Churchy. So he started a great campaign against the Celtic lilt and broad vowels. The vowels of Spence and myself are so broad that we have to be tapped lightly on the back of the neck to get them past our lips. We love broad, uncunning, accepting sounds and when we get started we fill up with vowel and, if sound were gas, we would be afloat in no time at all. And our lilt is so fierce that when Mr. Rawlins put us through a trial trip with a passage from Isaiah running down adulterers that gave us every chance of letting it rip without meaning to cause the adulterers any unease he stopped us in disgust and told us that he could not decide whether the mess we were making of it was just lilt or pure oratorio. So we got the side gate. Wilfie was one of the few who managed to twist his mouth into the shapes suitable for the sounds required by Mr. Rawlins. So Wilfie reads often in the hall, and we cannot say that it has done him very much good, worshipping strange windy vowels and shuttling back and forth like a tug between the two Testaments, whistling noisily to give notice of a passing diphthong. He has already been asked by the secretary of that sect, the Marchers, to bring out a book of forecasts. He manages to sound very delicate at the expense of giving the kids in the front row the idea that his jaws have been locked by piety and having them mutter to him as the reading proceeds:

“Come on, Wilf, let’s hear you, boy.”

But Mr. Rawlins is pleased and feels every time he hears Wilfie on the job that he has torn a few tassels from the Celtic fringe which has been getting bald for some time past.

“What are you reading this morning, Wilf?”

“A psalm. Yea, though I walk . . . You know the one. I read that the last time too. Rawlins wants me to do it again. He said there was something jerky and vulgar about my style. He also reckons he saw me smiling but that was only because I’ve got to keep my face all kind of strapped up like a dead man to make the high-class talk he likes. And sometimes I feel

dead too standing up there on the platform reading about sin and hell and talking in ways nobody in Mynydd Coch ever heard before. How would you feel if you stepped down from that platform after a long hard piece about Elijah and then had that Sam Price hand you two pennies with the words, 'For the eyes, Wilf, for the eyes.' "

"You know Sam. He's intolerant. But what did Rawlins say about the psalm and the way you read it?"

"He said that between the jerky tone and the fixed smile I was making this solemn passage sound like a charabanc trip through the valley of the shadow."

"That's thanks for the fine apostolic work you've done, Wilfie. But you keep up the jerky tone and get Rawlins disgusted enough and he'll put you on with us at the side gate."

"Oh, I'd like that. Nice, fresh, open-air job you boys got. And everybody knows you never make an entry unless Rawlins or somebody like that is actually standing over you."

"We're trying out a new method altogether. We think there are too many people like Rawlins who make a habit of being busy all the time and badgering elements all to hell."

"You're right there, Spencer. Too many of any sense. I wish I was like you, honest. But Rawlins must have helped my old man when I was had because I seem to be linked to the bloke. Not that I like badgering. Oh no. But I always seem to come in useful for people who feel the need to be doing a bit of badgering. If they see a bit of dust that makes the place look sloppy, I'm their brush. It makes me bristle, honest to God. I'm dogged. Last year Rawlins put me on as clerk for the milk scheme and I saw nothing but whiteness and bottles and pennies and thirst for a whole term. Then he made me chief marshal for that big gang of kids who go down to the dining-room to see that they kept their food within a radius of a yard from the plate. Now this reading to finish me off. He says I've got a natural sense of the holy."

"What does that mean?"

"Don't know exactly. Must mean he thinks I'm a bit like him."

"God help."

"He said if I could lose my Celtic vulgarity I could be a bishop."

"That's an outlook. No wonder you shake, Wilfie. What good do you think all those tonics will do with the future holding a club of that kind over your head? No wonder you take so long to get to sleep and talk like a magpie even when you do. Keep vulgar, boy, and stay on the safe side. See how the tide is creeping up to your head. Like septic. Milk-scheme, dinner marshal, acting as a mudguard for those cannibals as they shovel their grub about, now chief reader, soon bishop. God knows where you'll wind up with Rawlins at the helm. If you find yourself running short of vulgarity, let us know. We've got plenty."

"Thank you, Spencer. These readings haunt me. There are some kids in the lower forms who have seen me on that platform so often holding the Bible they think I wrote it or sell it. It's a terrible thing to have kids thinking that about you. When I practise my readings in the house, I get my old man believing in miracles. Last week when I was running over that passage about Abraham and Isaac he said that what Mynydd Coch needed was a good, first-class sacrifice because there was no doubt that Baal must be at the back of such articles as coal and dole. And he looked at me hard as if he were measuring me for the knife. And my mother, whenever she sees me twisting my face to make my voice refined, she just puts one of those big brown constipation pills in front of me. One day I'm going to start collecting those pills as they come, take them all at once and stay on the mountain for a week, acting just like a pony. That'll show them. I fit into the dreams of other people too easily. But that pony on the mountain caper would show them."

"That's the spirit, boy. Resist. Play hell. When in doubt, neigh."

"It's that coat that makes a lot of your trouble, Wilf," I say. "It makes you look as if you're dressed for some kind of ceremony."

"I think so too. It must be that which gives me the holy look Rawlins was on about. I'm having it dyed after the war."

"About time too."

The assembly-bell beings to ring. The clamour of boys within the school dies down. Mr. Rawlins, gowned, prim, severe, pokes his head around the main entrance door. Mr. Rawlins has a peculiar look, a white, impatient, unhappy expression, of a man who has practised to the full such rites as self-discipline, indigestion, gardening, mysticism, administration and even yet finds himself short of suitable articles to stuff into the odd corners of his being where he is still tormented by the sense of emptiness.

He waves his hand at Wilfie.

"Come here, Harris. Quickly now."

"Yes, sir." Wilfie advances towards Mr. Rawlins at a long trot.

"One day," says Spence, throwing his satchel into a corner of the yard, "Wilfie will add a tail to his other troubles. When Rawlins calls, he's just like a dog."

Mr. Rawlins is speaking urgently to Wilf. He has a high voice which carries clearly to our part of the yard. Wilfie's voice, when he is speaking with someone else, assumes promptly the precise tone of the other. This gift of adaptation is never more strongly developed than when he is speaking to Mr. Rawlins. We can hear them fluting powerfully at each other like a pair of blackbirds in the season when blackbirds wish to leave nothing in doubt.

"No mistakes this morning, Harris."

"No, sir, I've been at it since breakfast."

"No vulgar gallicisms."

"No, sir."

"Refined and sombre."

"Yes, sir."

"Dread. The valley of the shadow. Yet a firm assurance. They comfort me."

"Yes, sir."

"And dignity. Above all else, dignity. These boys you read to groan under the yoke of a crude vulgarity. It must be tempered by a fine example. I do what I can. I have striven hard. But I must be helped."

Mr. Rawlins ran his hand across his tall bland brow. "There are limits to what one man can do."

"Yes, sir."

"You may go now. And may you find strength from the one source wherein it may be sought."

"Yes, sir."

Wilf vanishes from sight. Mr. Rawlins advances into full view. He looks at us lounging against the gate-posts. There is so little genuine sympathy with us in Mr. Rawlins' system of ideas and beliefs the mere sight of him puts a biting edge on our truculence. He sets the seal on our oafishness, gives it by the very shrillness of his counter-suggestion a will to subsist more fierce than it had before. He does not like us. If you dig a foot below the average worm you will come across his opinion of Spencer and myself. The worst in Mr. Rawlins waits for the sight of us and jumps to battle stations. Our beings must have for his nostrils the smell of some old and painful failure. We have a notion though that most of the customs of Mynydd Coch get beneath his fins, sandy, irritant. He will be the first in the queue when those voters at Lake Success throw open their booth for purely private objections to this planet.

"Attend to your duties there," he shouts.

Spencer struggles about inside his jacket and brings out an exercise book without covers. This is the entry book. I produce a pencil and we hold these two articles well aloft to show Mr. Rawlins our efficiency. He grunts and makes his way into the assembly-hall. The bell stops. From inside the hall they start up with the hymn. The headmaster has a fancy for gloom and mostly the hymns chosen are those which the voters in Mynydd Coch sing outside the homes of the dead when a funeral is gathering. The pianist is the strongest boy in school, Meirion Farr. Meirion is a reader of 'Health and Strength', has expanded his chest with elastic contraptions to a point where we ache just to see him, and gives prize-winning papers to Youth Guilds on 'Habits to Avoid'. Sometimes Meirion comes out of hall with bits of ivory sticking to his fingers after a hymn of quick tempo and strongly marked rhythm or after a session in which the choristers needed a

little dragging along. They are singing 'Crown Him' this morning and it is being sung with gusto and speed. Having no late customers to talk with as yet we sit down comfortably on the two steps leading up to the gate and join in. We have deep voices and a way of harmonising that runs as smooth and sure as water. Mynydd Coch is full of these deep voices as if they had to be dug for like the coal which most of our fathers dig for a living. Our singing echoes around the yard, seeking issue, or unity with the voices within. A middle-aged woman from one of the fancy villas in the small residential area near the school walks down with a shopping basket on her arm. She is frowning and richly turned out. Spencer and I stare at her with a full unblinking stare for which we are sorry as soon as we become conscious of it, sincerely interested in the presence of this woman on earth, turned out the way she is. She frowns more thickly as she passes us and I do not know whether she frowns at our loud singing, for there is a sharp reaction among these people who inhabit the fancy villas against the bawling ecstasies of the Mynydd prolies, or the fact that we are looking at her with animal intentness at a moment when she is on foot and carrying a basket, two very ordinary things. She glances at me astonished as I articulate with wonderful clearness that line about bringing forth the royal diadem, which is a favourite line of mine, and she even looks into her shopping basket as if she had taken the message as a challenge. I admire the loops of lush white hair at the back of her head. I wish all the women I know in Mynydd Coch could come towards old age with this trim graciousness. She has a hat hanging on by sheer force of conceit, no bigger than my hand. I can imagine that hat causing much thought and comment among the observant and reflective characters who have done little except gather evidence about mankind, grouped around the main square of Mynydd Coch, since the labour market had its first fit about twenty-five years ago.

We sing ourselves out after three verses of the hymn. We find this business of pouring one's essence into sound as stupefying as cows must find the cud and we have cut down on the ration we allowed ourselves as kids.

"Rawlins," says Spencer, fishing a cigarette butt from his inside pocket and studying the thing, "Rawlins ought to have been a sculptor."

"Why let him off so mildly? Why turn him loose to sculpt? Why not tell him about the man who found he could enjoy himself jumping off cliffs and took it up steady?"

"You don't see the point, Lew. Rawlins should have worked it off on clay."

"Worked what off?"

"He sees a bit of life and straightaway he wants to fiddle about with it, to pinch it into the shape he likes. Now if he had worked it off on clay . . ."

"The clay would be complaining by now and Wilfie would be out here instead of being in there telling those little elements to fear no evil. That's all the difference there would be. Somebody's got to put up with the nuisances. Either it's us or the clay or something else. We help each other to keep the clot of nuisance from pressing too hard in any one place."

"Suppose so." Spencer looked down the hill. "Here's Ted Dolan, late for the fourth time this week and looking fatigued. One of these days we'll have to ask Ted if he doesn't mind being put down in the book, just for form's sake."

We watch Ted's progress. Ted fears as little evil from us as if he went into assembly every morning and listened to Wilfie pointing out the folly of all such fears. Ted is a very interesting element to watch. He is as broad almost as the gate we sit by. He has a lot of black hair which his father, who is one of the sect of Lookers in Mynydd Coch, does not believe in having cut too often. These Lookers wait hourly for the Judgement and stand ready to skip out of the road and work out a case in the comfort of the ditch. They cannot be blamed for holding this view, for life in Mynydd Coch has been bleak and confusing for a long time past. With us you can take one of three roads. You can wait for a job to begin or you can wait for the job to end or you can do the thing in real style, say what the hell to man and nature and wait for the universal blow-out. Having this death-cell notion strong upon them the Lookers lay no great stock on tidiness of appearance, this appearance

standing a good chance of being quite needless or even ridiculous a few seconds after the last kiss of soap on skin, of run of comb through hair. Ted has often been sent home by more sensitive teachers who find that two or three smaller pupils can hide behind Ted's mop and have a quiet day of it, and they give him strict orders to have a trim even if he has to rub the top two inches off against a wall. But back he comes untrimmed. He always brings a note from his father, the Looker, saying: 'Leave it grow. I got my reasons. A Looker.' Either the teacher thinks Ted's name is Looker and forgets to call him Dolan, or, if he has heard of the sect, grows to believe that Mr. Dolan is a trifling and partial Looker whose exclusive object for looking must be hair. We are friends of Ted. He is a bit older than we are. This is his third year in the fifth form and now and then he takes long leisurely swings at the Matriculation question and he hopes to get some kind of a School Leaving Certificate in the basic subjects before he goes into the army. That prospect does not bother him. He has had so much of his father's constant fretting that he sees in the whole of existence no really trustworthy point, so he does not see in military service any offence to or contradiction of some stable scheme of human values. Indeed, he tells us on most mornings when we have to do with him at the gate that he looks forward to being in the army. He gets tired of people like Rawlins who try to quicken up the tempo of his culture and carry on a lot of propaganda against the slipshod way he approaches his clothes which look as if they were dropped on to him, as he passed, from a tall roof through thick cloud. In the army, Ted thinks, his father's views on hair and the Judgement will cut less ice than in Mynydd Coch, for soldiers, as a class, between violence, obedience and drink tend to think naturally in terms of doom and there is nothing in the doctrines of the Lookers which will strike anything like a new note in the skulls of those armed geniuses who ponder on global wars. He looks forward also to being shorn so that people will have a fair idea of what he looks like. Even if it means, as in the case of Samson, that he will lose some part of his great strength it will be a relief not to be talked to as if he were a gorilla. He says

too that it will be nice to have at least one meal when his father will not bend over him, just as he has his mouth so full of food that his brain is pressed tight against his skull making him torpid and unprepared, and say, 'Your last, as far as you know. Eat up, son, and chew well.' That puts dots on Ted.

Ted walks in a slow, heavy, zigzag way, as if two distant points of the earth were exercising an equal tug on his longings. He is easily as strong as Meirion Farr, the pianist, and makes a useful Rugby player when the referee, with memories of handing back an arm or a leg to some element who has just been having a *mêlée* with Ted, does not warn him off the field as a good way of starting the match. In the East Ted would have made a high-grade strangler, getting offers from all sultans and special subsistence rates from the boys at the Ministry of Labour to cover travelling and pauses between jobs. If he is your friend there is no nicer subject in all Mynydd Coch than Ted. We often help him with his work whenever he gets near enough to it to be aware of it and baffled by it. He is grateful. He says there is genius in Spencer and me when he hears us giving out five clear sentences on any theme. He says that when he gets into the army and the Government barbers have got through the top layers of his hair he will send it home to us for stitching into a worrying shirt for Wilfie.

Ted sits down near Spencer. He carries no satchel. His first and only one wore out years ago and his father's world outlook plus the poor rates of social insurance make it hard for him to get another. Ted carries books pushed into every pocket on his person, text-books in jacket, exercise books rolled up into his trousers or pushed down flat under his belt. He sits silent for a while looking at the pattern of shadows cast by a clump of oaks over the road hiding a gun site. His coat swings open. The buttons of his shirt front have burst away. I can see the strong swell of his chest as he gets his breath. He looks at me vacantly. He is still giddy after his zig-zagging pilgrimage up the hill. I can understand why so many of the girls in Mynydd Coch line up in front of Ted. With a tropical vine and a frankly legitimate ape for a parent he would be the very twin of Tarzan.

He makes me and Spencer look degenerate except about the head. It strikes me that all the attention Ted gets from girls might be serving to slow up his movements.

"You still going about with that Vinolia Maggs, Ted?"

"Off and on. Why, Lew?"

"They say she's very welcoming."

"She is too. But it's the band that makes me tired now."

"Band? What band is this, Ted?"

"The Air Cadets' band. They've given me a trumpet and I'm learning fast. It's an old trumpet and it won't work at all unless you've got more blast than a bomb. They've got me on simple tunes for a bit. 'Woodland Fancies' and 'God Save the King' and items like that. I want you to hear me when I widen out into something hot."

"We'll be looking forward to that, Ted," I say with grave politeness.

I do not mean that. We do not like noise, especially noise from trumpets which we have always looked on as one of the things wrong with man. It is good that man should be proud of his power to breathe in a universe where, they say, there are many areas in space where even this accomplishment is either rationed or out of the question, but blowing into a trumpet just to show that you can breathe is an abuse of pride and should be stopped. Nor can we see Ted as a musician. We have heard him trying to harmonise when he has come in with us to render a hymn or folk tune and his sense of fitness in this field is as subtle as a kick in the ear. But we must help to keep each other confidently alive, so we tell him that the future seems better now that we know it will include a round of trumpeting from him. It would have been better if he had made tracks for some nice quiet future as a wrestler or the prefabricated column of a memorial arch, but it is not for us to say so because we believe in encouraging the elements who turn up late at the side gate; nine times out of ten they have some kind of woe, getting the wrong food or the wrong parents and generally being bitten silly by some old deep-rooted desperation, which this war and the succeeding years of lurching, sun-struck peace will do nothing to allay.

"I'm not seeing so much of Vinolia now," says Ted.

"Quarrelled?"

"Oh no. I never quarrel. I get on all right with everybody. But Vinolia's old man is a Drummer."

The Drummers are another sect in Mynydd Coch. They were established by a very far-seeing young seer called Evan Jacobs. Sitting disgruntled on the mountainside one night he saw a cloud formation which resembled, he thought, a hand cupped over an ear. This gives Evan the idea that God is deaf. This idea squares well with the state of Mynydd Coch which is nothing more than a quadrangle of slopes, coal, rent and chaos. Walk through its streets and you get the impression that no one is listening, that no one in this world has ever listened. Our appeals, said Evan, are too quiet to be heard. So he founds the Drummers and uses the collections to buy drums. That was two years ago. The sect has grown. It is surprising how many people enjoy drumming even when they do not know what lies at the back of it. They enjoy it even more when they feel that if they do it loudly enough it will ease their sense of sin and lower the rent. Every time they meet there is a scramble for the sticks. It is clear that Evan has tapped a wide seam of unexpressed human impulse in this division. If God was not deaf at the time that Evan saw the ear in the sky, it might well be true after twenty-four months of hard beating on the pig-skin by this body of Drummers.

"Doesn't Vinolia live in the same row as you?" asks Spence.

"The same row exactly."

"What can be the matter with that place? Maggs a Drummer, your old man a Looker. That must be the queerest street in all Mynydd. The air must be dense and quivering with delirium."

"It's the mountain. It's slipped in that part. It hangs right over the houses."

"It must be hanging right into the brains of the elements who live there."

"It frightens them, Spence, honest. The mountain frightens the wits out of them. They look up at it. We can't help that because the mountain is always there looking down at us. One

day, we say, it's going to come down without knocking and in those houses there's no room for us, let alone a mountain. There'll have to be a lot of moving up or sleeping in layers if the thing is going to come in and be in any way cosy. So the people in our row have got to have a belief to hang on to. That's why they Drum and Look and carry on in that fashion."

"They think the mountain's going to make a fool out of them so they go ahead and get there before the mountain."

"Something like that."

"How does Mr. Maggs treat you?"

"Bad. He's fierce against love."

"Against love? Is that part of the cult too?"

"Kind of. When the Drummers go to their hut and start their session and make a racket they get a lot of courting couples coming in to protest that all this drumming is putting them off their stroke. Either shut up, say these couples, or stick to one beat that we can fit our antics into. But the Drummers don't stick to any one rhythm. It's a sort of free for all and anybody can take a bang as soon as he sees he has a stick and there's nobody between him and the drum. So Maggs glares at me and drives me away from Vinolia. It doesn't help either that my old man is a big man with the Lookers. Maggs says the Lookers are a lot of pansies who grizzle about things but never get down to business."

"Things are very complicated in your row," says Spence. "Personally I think it will be a blessing when the mountain makes its next move. It would mean a few less kids in the open air schools if somebody could go and give it a little shove now before you start thinking up any more religions. How's the work going, Ted?"

"I'm only playing simple pieces so far, like I told you. 'Woodland Fancies' and easy articles like that."

"Not the bugling, you jay. The book work."

"Oh all right. I'm doing some very steady work in geography."

"That's a good subject for you, Ted. It'll come in very handy for you when you're in the army. You'll be able to pick out countries to conquer and things like that."

"That's what my old man thinks. He's got a big war map and it hangs on the wall opposite where I eat and I move the flags."

"But you won't be able to take the wall into an exam with you. They'd see it. What about your other subjects? French for a start. The French I've heard you talk is brand new."

"Off and on I get down to it and sometimes I make a noise that's something like. My old man is getting interested in my work too, whenever he can spare the time off from being a Looker. He thinks I've been in this school a long time. So he says 'Ted, you'd better learn to read, boyo, for the exam.' Then I say, knowing his armour and every single chink in it, 'How do you know it will ever come off?' Then his face darkens and he says 'You're right, Ted. We go from minute to minute, our ears stiff in expectation for the final rumble. Take it easy, son, and keep on Looking.' Then I put my book away and slip out to take up with the bugle or Vinolia or somebody."

Ted stands up and moves across the yard towards his form-room which is an emergency building with a tin roof and just about high enough for Ted.

"If my old man was a Looker instead of being just generally on his guard," says Spence, "I'd do a lot more laughing. Nothing seems to matter a damn with those elements. It's a handy belief and no mistake."

"Ted gets all the luck. All the chest, and a brain he couldn't even use for broth and his old man legally and cosily a loon."

Things get brisker at the side gate. There is a procession of ten or twelve kids who are well known as paper-boys and messengers for various shops in the area. We pass these through with greetings and a few inquiries about the state of trade in their particular lines of activity. Some of these boys do about two hours of hauling and bicycling about the streets of Mynydd Coch before breakfast, and there is no doubt that a lot of them drop into school just for a change of face, a sit down and, in the quieter lessons, a nap. But when they turn up at the side gate there is always an alert competent look about them, for they have been out of bed so long the day for them is mature and they are taking life in a quick assured stride.

In the hall they are now singing the Lord's Prayer. The singing is ragged, without enthusiasm, as if experience with the civilisation of scarcity in Mynydd Coch has broken the singers of the habit of appealing with any deliberate persuasion to the life-force for succour. The singing has got worse since the war started. Kids' voices seem to break sooner. Mr. Rawlins thinks it is such things as sex dramas on the films that destroy in them the wish to remain soprano and pure. But it is good sitting there in the sunlight staring at the deep green of the trees around the gun site and listening to something but guns. Two boys come bolting from the entrance and hare towards the toilets which are half-way down the yard. They are moaning as if making a great effort to cope with distress.

"What are they competing for?" I ask.

"It's that national wholemeal bread," says Spence. "I read somewhere in a Digest of handy facts last time I was fire-watching that this bread is full of barley and chicken-grit and God knows what, just what they ate in the Middle Ages to make that period an age of faith. It kept man humble and on the run and turned his thoughts to the worship of sure, solemn things like spires. The article also said this bread loosens the bowels of young elements faster than gunpowder."

"Looks like it. Fawkes couldn't have done a better job with those two boys who just flashed past to the offices."

The school erupts into clamour as the boys stream out of assembly. We move into the corridors to get on with the second part of our duty which is to help sort out the groups of kids that get clotted up in the exit, partly because they are borne helplessly along and cannot help it, partly because this manœuvre, properly carried out, can waste as many as five whole minutes. We see Wilfie standing in a corner of the cloak-room apparently trying to hide beneath the layers of kids' coats and being talked to passionately by Mr. Rawlins who is shaking a full length of finger into his face.

"Deliberate!" Mr. Rawlins is saying. "Quite deliberate!"

"Oh no, sir. No, Mr. Rawlins."

"What's up?" I ask Wally Wedmore. Wally is the Deputy Head Prefect, a short, strong-faced boy, a lover and student of

German, kindly and worried half-way to death by the conduct of the German race. He says if their verbs were regular, they'd be too, but we think Wally gives too much notice to verbs. Taken in moderation, they do no harm.

"Wilfie lapsed in his reading," says Wally. "He started off in the most refined way you ever heard. So refined nobody could hear but Rawlins was smiling and looking delighted as if he were a cat and Wilf a champion stroker. Wilf's tones went further and further back and it was only a matter of time before they started unhoisting his trousers in the rear. He seemed ready to choke. Then some kid in the front started to laugh. Wilf lost the place. He made an effort to rally and started up again in his natural voice but in the middle of another psalm altogether. Rawlins is now making him out to be an enemy of the faith. He's just called Wilf a crypto-diabolist and all Wilf can do is chew the sleeve of the nearest coat."

"Poor Wilf. This'll shake him."

"He looks shook." The study of German has done something to Wally's participles.

When the corridors clear we make our way to our form-room. It is in an older part of the school and was designed as a lecture room with the desks arranged in tiers, an obsolete and musty site. Those who traffic in Roman antiquities, such as the Head Prefect, Leo Warburton, who will land up on the economic secretariat of U.N.O., and is getting to look like a commissar of the Legions after four years of studying the tale of Cæsar's Gaulish campaigns, say the lay-out of the desks is very shrewd and reflects great credit on the County Council because they should make us feel like senators. Leo thinks the world of such elements as senators. His father owns the biggest furniture store in Mynydd Coch and knows more than we do about why they have such thick doors on banks. Leo has no reservations about the need for privilege, hierarchy and bicameral constitutions. It would not surprise us to find that Leo and his father take their meals in long white shirts cut in the style of a toga, dragging their trousers on only when the minister calls. The desks have no such effect on us.

We feel too conspicuous with our ranks sloping upward. Real talent has been given to devise the ugliness of this room. Its windows are narrowly and primly Calvinistic. The walls are scrofulous and stained. A group of voters who turned up with their equipment two years ago and were about to give the walls a fresh coat of distemper were switched to some more urgent task, and we are waiting for the flux of great decisions to bring those renovators our way again because there are enough finger prints on the off-yellow remnants of the last coat to land the whole of humanity in gaol. The room has one advantage. It is at the end of a long corridor, far from the head-master's room. If we wish to make a noise, we can. That is not often, for there is much in our surroundings to prompt a thoughtful gravity.

CHAPTER II

OUR FIRST lesson of the morning is biology with Mr. Rawlins. This is not one of our regular subjects. It is thrown in as a supplementary topic with a view to correcting an over-emphasis in our curriculum. It is feared that unrelieved truck with history, languages, politics and grammar will give our brains a soft centre of pure wool which will undermine our characters as citizens. So, we are treated to a little hardening twice a week by Mr. Rawlins and his talk of amœbas and plant life. No man ever made a stranger choice than Mr. Rawlins when he elected to teach biology. This subject seems to scare and depress him. He dances around it with the same mixture of interest and terror as you find in a child hopping around an exploding firework, and he will reach top tempo when he hears of what the average hormone will do when accosted by a gamma-ray. The purpose of this subject, we take it, is to instruct us smooth animals in the joint origin and existence of the rougher sort. It is to comment on the mechanics of love and procreation. It is to console man's hatred of his imperfections by an insistence on the valuable work already done under very choppy and difficult conditions by the single instrument of humanity in fashioning a world less savage and unpredictable. We are all for these lines of thought. In the matter of love we are all fumbling badly in our age group and could do with a few frank footnotes drawn from the experience of the present and the better performers of the past. As for our origins, we take a sombre view of man, for blitheness would be freakish in a place like Mynydd Coch, and we do not see that we are so good we need to be fussy. If a wood-louse or wart-hog were fixed on as having provided the parent impulse we would not be surprised and would take it in good part but stooping a little more just to see how the hog and the louse are taking it. As for bucking up man's spirit and increasing his

dignity by giving him part of the credit that has been given almost exclusively to gods, we think that this particular bit of book-keeping has been long delayed. As for consolation, we need that too. We know belts of elements in Mynydd Coch alone who act worse than chimpanzees and who can be tolerated only if you are far away or willing to treat them strictly as starting-points in the stale old life-cycle of climb and throwdown.

But these topics seem only to sicken or infuriate Mr. Rawlins. He has no patience with them at all. The more he has been challenged by his subject to look the physical facts of existence squarely in the face the more swiftly has he run back to the sheltering ideas of the past. We have been told that his father was a chemist and his mother a noted pietist and hymn writer. Both parents are dead now but considering the way Mr. Rawlins has landed up in middle age, we can hear the mother laughing at the father most days of the week. It would be interesting to have a list of the things that helped his mother's ghost to wither the legs of his scientific spirit. Puritanism in him has sharpened to a narrow defensive head. It is evident from all he says that life, viewed as a fierce, untidy rout of creatures struggling towards the target of coition strikes him cold with dread. He is all for doubling the cloak of emotion and restraint with which we cover this gambol. He even blushes when we see him on the road speaking to some lady of his acquaintance and that is silly when you think of the sort of action that we have seen going forward unconcealed on the slopes of Mynydd Coch. It cannot be that he has any basic objection to life, for he strives in every way to be a useful citizen even to the point of being a direct nuisance to voters who are geared to a slower ideal of devotion than he. He obviously deplores the nasty embarrassing intimacy of creation as the one instance of bad planning he can charge against God, and he visibly sways over his desk as if overcome by the irrational horror of it when we lustily bring the subject to his notice. He will be the first in the years to come to urge, as an answer to the menace of hunger and dwindling top-soil, that the faster-breeding sections of the species be given ad hoc

grants for the purchase of dominoes. If we could put a light on all the motives underlying Mr. Rawlins' incapacity for brotherhood we should be learning much of human failure. But we are too sturdily alive to give him much peace. Questions rasp around inside us and we are raw to know. We question Mr. Rawlins about the love-life of moles and whales. Spencer uncovered some interesting data on these two creatures in the course of his private reading and if he did not garble his account over-much, moles and whales appear to have achieved a pleasing monomania in respect of ideology. But Mr. Rawlins treats our request with contempt. He says that we are not likely to spend much of our time burrowing or floating even in Mynydd Coch where jobs may again be scarce, and that the habits of the animals mentioned are not sweet or fitting alleys of research. We keep an open mind on this. The old methods seem just about played out and an altogether new approach in these fundamental matters might ginger up the average brand of human being no end. Mr. Rawlins' comments on the whole business are of an obliquity to baffle all but the most wary. Anyone dropping into one of our classes and listening to Mr. Rawlins closely might well go away with the notion that all living things cohabit by post, at the current rate of twopence halfpenny a time, which is still pretty cheap. The one thing that really has him glowing with a respectful eloquence is the gift of certain insects which, when faced or prodded by the distressing urge to multiply do the job inwardly, without crowding the floor space with second parties, and just split in two. Mr. Rawlins has brooded so much on the clean, handsome neatness of this method that his imagination working with two-fisted creative fervour might yet coerce the life-force into letting him walk about in two halves. Plants and flowers also strike Mr. Rawlins as living by means purer than the groping, coupling technique to which we are damned. Pollen, waiting for the kiss of wind or bee to take it on its seminal course; no word, no lust, no fumbling agony of frustration or reproach. It will not surprise us to see Mr. Rawlins one day stacking up his pollen and coming in with two bees and a south wind on his forehead arranging terms for the removal.

On the question of origins, he concedes an inch here and there to the main biological theories but he clings none the less to a fundamental interpretation of the Bible. To seek wisdom outside the limits of direct revelation is to cut the heart to ribbons and Mr. Rawlins fights for the integrity of his heart. He is half-choked by a sense of man's everlasting helplessness and his need to have some current of direction and authority outside the pathetic orbit of human ability. He whispers once in a while about the Record of the Rocks but we feel that he still believes that this record was deliberately planted, bitten out of the bare stone by some body of modern mischief-makers and sleep-spoilers like the trades unions or the Discussion Group down at the Institute. He frankly cannot conceive of man having been other than he is now. The concept of change has never found an appropriate cog in Mr. Rawlins to catch into and make his being tick. The very shadow of the suggestion if cast upon him makes him disturbed and miserable, which just shows that the lack of imagination is a certifiable complaint like rickets or diabetes, and if you could inject people with imagination as you can with vitamin extract or insulin we would have a better grip on the witless antics of men. We make Mr. Rawlins wince with our crude assertions of directly animal ancestry. We are quite sincere in this. We have seen in our days only a darkening crisis which does not promote an optimistic love of man. We are convinced that our own great-grandparents must have been covered all over with hair and fully anthropoid; that they got tired of shrieking and scratching out their emblems of lonely pride and mutating consonants in their tree-top lairs in the Northern hills and came swinging down from branch to branch into the Southern valleys where they proceeded to work in pits, shaving and becoming religious the while, losing their hair as their hills became savagely bare under the axes of their masters. If they had been fully human they would not have been such fools as to fashion and tolerate a civilisation such as we see in Mynydd Coch. When we advance these views, we can see Mr. Rawlins' hair dropping out with shock, and his tonsure will reach his collar in the back when later he hears the views of the Lysenko school which

hopes to run human affairs on the basis of a planned mutability. He has even brought a photograph of his own great-grandfather, a very tidy voter, certainly not the type to travel by tree, and in all respects hairless, being bald as a herring as well as being clean-shaven. Mr. Rawlins sticks hard to his myths. They are his winter woollens. The theories of exclusively animal beginning, he says, do not square with the facts of our human faculties.

"But what about them apes?" someone asks in Mynydd Coch idiom, and the idiom makes him shudder as much as all the rest of life's abundant darkness.

He explains, and we can see him being torn to painful pieces by the conflicting tug of science and religion. The picture he gives us in its final form is as follows. Creatures of various attributes hung about the world for a considerable time watching ice melt, winking at the Ethical Society and stamping their mark on the rocks. That done, they vanish and then the job of creation is really taken in hand, this time on the basis of a merciful divine observation made during the period of trial and error, and Adam is ribbed and tempted in readiness for the great pilgrimage.

With regard to human relations in their general context, Mr. Rawlins is authoritarian to the last degree. The egalitarian tomfoolery underlying the many strikes and demonstrations that have filled the recent history of Mynydd Coch he regards as evil in its most classic form. He hates the echoes of a fundamental unrest that still clang about in our thoughts and faces. From the colliery managers and directors with whom he rubs elbows and delusions in the course of his charity work he has come to believe that if miners were as insensible and tractable as the mandrils and machines they use, all would be well in the coal trade. Endurance is all. If the divine will is benevolent, only through the medium of a passive humanity can it find expression. A twitching humanity, and Mr. Rawlins sees in Mynydd Coch as unreasonable a mob of twitchers as ever lived, only sours the divine will, puts it off its stroke and makes it fractious. He sees no possible basis for human unity. One can mitigate the shocking spectacle by holding firm to

faith and fencing oneself around with the decencies of Christian behaviour and that is all. One day we were discussing the Indian problem. Knowing Mr. Rawlins' desperate distrust of the coloured population, regarding them, as he regards sex, as a needless and bitter complexity, we took up the tongs for Gandhi and played wild forms of political hatchetry with the notion of white hegemony and the pretensions of the British raj. Mr. Rawlins carried on as if he sleeps with the raj and seemed to feel that his own sense of personal security were being challenged.

"Think," he said in his high, startled voice. "Think of three hundred million Indians, with knives, and you, a white man and unarmed, in front of them and being chased. How would you feel? What would you do?"

In our different ways we told him. We would adjust our tint to that of the preponderant mass, borrow a knife, get in there with them and do some chasing. Five years from now we will be having the same argument with Mr. Rawlins as, in one part of Asia and Africa after another, the ancient, egalitarian word of liberalism becomes the flesh of actual desire. There is no point in running risks in order to assert one's supremacy in any situation. There have been too many risks and too many assertions in this world. But Mr. Rawlins will not have this even with a bonus. His fears are vivid and clamant and not to be argued down. He interprets all phenomena, especially human, with a profound personalness that cuts the efficiency of thinking down to the bare bone. He lives in a fierce sunlit nightmare. He is convinced that the moral sense, the urge to guide and instruct, is implanted in full measure only in a few minds. These will lead us through the penumbra. The rest of us will shamble along in the rear, grunting and straining, landing up in such places as Mynydd Coch and war graves, leaving some sort of record in rent-books if not on rocks. So you see Mr. Rawlins lives in a surprising and unfriendly world. He damns man in the abstract as an impotent, evil and messy creature, yet selects various groups and classes among men as being divinely inspired to make a halter of their own self-profitable notions for our suffering necks. He denies the

animal origin yet indicts the mass of men as beasts to be checked and disciplined only by a vigorous ring-master, an element about mid-way between Elijah and an average director of one of the larger steel cartels.

The school has become quite silent. An occasional boy marches down the corridor to get a book from his locker and by the speed of the boy's progress we can guess the name of the master who has sent him on the errand. From across the yard a junior form begins to decline a Latin noun with drowsy slavishness. The Romans marched over the Britons a long time since and now they are as tired as we are. We wait for Mr. Rawlins. He is no doubt busy with one or another of the administrative duties connected with school meals or A.R.P. that have come along to thrust academic objectives from pride of place in most of our schools. We do not mind. These interruptions and interludes break the tension between master and pupil that had tended to become obsessive and sterilising. Being administered from morning until night creates in the mind a quietness from which all kinds of new and fertilising suggestions for passing on the time might arise.

In a corner Morg Mathews and Leo Warburton are entering into their third year of bitter argument about the merit of the German and Soviet Armies. Leo has absorbed a fair number of ideas from his father, the conservative furnisher, from Mr. Rawlins and similar philosophers, and he is as disturbed by Bolshevism as if it were something furry and rodent moving about beneath his shirt bent on no good. Morg Mathews is outspokenly atheist and libertarian, suckled on Gorki and a bitter mother and loping like a wolf around the flocks of the faithful. Morg holds that the Soviets are a kind of cleaner to which all other civilisations will have to go eventually, to get the top dirt sponged off in readiness for a more thorough cleansing. So they go on arguing. With international barriers being consistently lowered under the impact of internationally shared ideas we look forward to the day when these two will have dispensed with the banal ties of national origin and Leo will be found monocling around in the Reichswehr singing hymns to traditional observances and ordering the castration

of pacifists, and Morg with a red star in his helmet placing a defensive sword between Leo and the threatened area of his pacifist brethren.

Most of us are reading. Wally Wedmore is studying a pre-war copy of a German illustrated magazine which gives a boost to the progress of town-planning in the Reich. Wally is tut-tutting as he turns the pages, puzzled to know why such an eye for amenity as is displayed here should ever have become so bloodshot. Sammy Price is leaning against the window staring out at the school field where a score of sheep have been brought in to nibble the grass flat since the groundsman and his scythe went off to the war. The keen attention with which Sam is looking at the sheep makes us think that he expects them, any regimented minute now, to start declining in chorus with the boys in the classroom over the yard. Sam is small and solemn as a headstone. With a powdered wig he would look exactly like that sketch of Robespierre in the Versailles museum. Sammy was born with an unshakable hatred in his system of many things and, to date, life has not done much to persuade him to let up. He laughs less than anybody I know. His father went to gaol way back in 1926 for obstructing policemen in the course of being policemen. He keeps in his pocket crumpled yellow newspaper cuttings which relate these events, and more than once he has read them out to us in that deep hollow at the farther end of the field where we go for a smoke and an undisturbed talk about social questions on sunlit days. Around those cuttings has crystallised Sam's creative legend and there is not a tendril of his intense being that has not its root deeply bedded in it. The paragraphs have made grooves in his mind. His father died of silicosis two years ago. That fact pencilled the mark where the grooves would go and they have grown deeper, for in Sam's bitterness there is a passionate vigour of intellectual purpose that makes a clean, sharp furrow in the part of his being which is affected. The day after his father was buried he came to school. He walked over to the hollow with us. Not one of us had anything to say about what had happened for the sight and sound of disaster brings out all the dumbness in us like a slow rash. Sammy

brought out the ancient cuttings and read them out to us in a cold caustic voice that was terrible to hear. It made us thoughtful and we forgot to smoke. The shadow of his father's life hangs fast on Sammy. He wears it like a sleeved garment. He has distilled from it a little liquid of social revelation whose acid pungency denies him all rest. Convinced that to make of historical insight an impulsive force for change you must concentrate your gaze on one especial, small and carefully chosen sector of experience, he regards his own private experience as being of greater value to him than all the endemic untidy splurging of nations over one another's boundaries. He has a way of communicating his unease to those around him. The more contented and conservative among the teachers react badly to his pensive joylessness. They charge him with being the victim of an unhealthy monomania, maturing downward into manic depression, an obstinate perversity in allowing a trivial ghost of misfortune from the past to loom larger in the spectrum of his days than the fascinating if rather crimson advances of the present. Mr. Rawlins, in wilder moods, confidently predicts the madhouse as Sammy's terminus. Sammy listens courteously to these critics and prophets, reads massively, masters his subjects and deepens his grooves with incisive love. He gets to look more and more like that sketch of Robespierre. One day his silence will ripen into sound and he will speak as the tribune of the people in the crucible of whose ills he has been baked to classic hardness. No hand will have the strength to pluck his protest by the root, for he, living, walking, sleeping, thinking, is the root. When that day comes, the cold wind of his unrest which now makes Sammy stare alternately at himself and the world will blow through the towers of the privileged and over the mud-flats of the servile as they feel the incorruptible lucidity of his contempt.

Near Sam sits Benny Turner. Benny is the tallest among us with thick black hair on which he plasters anything likely to give it a shine. Some time back he helped himself to a bottle of medicated paraffin belonging to his brother-in-law who has a lingering appendix and swallows this stuff and Ben came to

school with his hair looking glossy and amazed. He has a dark, thick-lipped, lazy face. His hand moves constantly over his hair ruffling it into waves. He is specialising in languages but does little work at them. He is an amateur saxophonist and drummer and thinks to earn a living without too much toil in a dance band. Most of his thinking and talking is about girls. He has taken so many books on sexual pathology and tropical cults like voodoo from the Mynydd Coch Library that the librarian, a simple-minded patriot with a limp called Isaac Lewis the Leg, had Benny reported for indifference to and even hostility towards the demands of military preparedness and national unity. With Benny as our guide we know, to date, ten times more about what is sinister and to be avoided in sex than about what is licit and generally practised in Mynydd Coch. With his chronicle of perversions and the new dance rhythms he keeps working out in his role of drummer, he has us in a daze. If ever we get married our wives will have to work overtime to get our notions sorted out. Unless the effect of our discussions with Benny wears off fast, we are likely to be very restless and unpredictable in this sphere. Our eyes are pretty well glazed from the blast of some of Benny's bombshells. Once he brought us a book on the Venus cult in Haiti and he showed us pictures in the book of worshippers who belonged to this cult shaping up for what looked to us like the championship solo in some kind of sexual eisteddfod although most of the elements in this caper were not standing up or holding copies as the boys do when they compete in eisteddfods at Mynydd. These pictures had a powerful influence upon us. We can still see the mark of Wally Wedmore's teeth upon the wood of his desk. Leo Warburton had to stay home from school for two days to rest and Wilfie whinnied and hiccupped in a snorting animal way for five minutes then lost the gift of speech completely for several hours, which was not a misfortune for those upon whom Wilfie normally unloads his daily harvest of dread. Perhaps Isaac Lewis the Leg was a bit nearer the truth than usual when he charged Benny with slowing up the national effort. . . .

Benny has two books open in front of him. They are large,

impressive books, one of them a small printed history of French literature, but he reads neither. His eyes are fixed on his fingers which are tapping out a soft insistent beat on the desk. None of us wants to listen but our ears are none the less on Benny's fingers. The rhythm has no pattern on the surface. Beneath, somewhere, in a lightening night of sound and feeling, there is the suggestion of meaning. Leo Warburton, who regards all jazz measures as a new bastard mysticism with which we are trying in part to fill up the tanks left dry by the evaporation of our old faiths, gets annoyed and stares at the back of Benny's head with a flinty stare he has picked up from his father.

"What is that thing, Benny?" asks Spencer.

"Some kind of funeral song from Haiti. Don't you think it's clever?"

"It's plain depressing," says Sammy.

"Oh you don't appreciate it. They sing this song around graveyards. They've got some reason for it, they tell me. To keep the corpse from being used as a zombie or something."

"You mean they dig them up?" asks Wilfie.

"They dig them up and put them to work."

"In the houses, where you can see them?"

"In and out of the house, just like one of the family."

"Good God. Fancy that."

"That's better than Mynydd Coch before the war," says Morg Mathews. "They could have dug them up here and still not found any work for them. In any case, it's plain undercutting, digging the voters up in that way and setting them to tasks. Start that sort of thing and before you know it, you get a trade union organiser given away with every head-stone."

"The whole thing is daft," says Sam. "They carry life too far, those people. Think of it. They put you in the Dark Meadow, which isn't the worst of places to be. The preacher stands above waiting to cut you adrift with the usual words. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Then you get a transfer. Somebody's taken you on as a cleaner. No green card from the Exchange. No parcels from home. No chance even of wasting a bit of time changing your clothes every time you get wet.

Just feeling confused every time you hear 'Lead Kindly Light' and wondering why the thing sounds so familiar. Dust to dust. And you stand in a parlour with the bloke who dug you up sticking his head around the door and telling you that after all that digging the least he can expect is to see the place looking spick and span. And you wonder in which direction the duster should first be flicked, at yourself or the chairs."

"It's terrible, terrible," says Wilfie very quietly.

"Benny," says Sam after a little pause. "You find yourself a graveyard and work this business out for yourself. A minute more of that death chant and they'll be able to bring their spades around for us."

Benny resumes his tapping.

"For Christ's sake," says Sam.

The door opens without a sound and Mr. Rawlins' gown-flap comes into view. He himself jumps after it into the room. This is one of his typical movements. He seems to think that life is full of secrets and conspiracies that he is not a party to and by one of these sudden jumps he hopes one day to catch them at home in full view and bloom. One day he will, and he will jump right back.

"Did you blaspheme?" he asks Sam austere.

"Yes sir." Sammy straightens up and is obviously getting his thoughts into line in case Mr. Rawlins decides to make an issue of it. Sam has been reading Bradlaugh on Bradlaugh and he has some very fine points about the Blasphemy Acts, the very points that Bradlaugh used before he was thrown down those stairs in Parliament. There are no stairs near and Sammy feels on surer ground than Bradlaugh. Mr. Rawlins looks hard at Sammy, keeping his gowned arm extended towards us in dark exclamation. He sees in Sammy the pale sinister negation of himself. He appears to sicken at the sight of the great distance he would have to traverse even to get on hitting terms with Sam.

"Don't."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Rawlins decides that no biology will be taught that morning. He takes some papers from a folder under his arm

and gives us an outline of the big events that are going to put this day into a record glow. We are going to have some sketches in the main hall which have been written in thick lead by some young element in the middle school who is connected with the School Savings Committee. Then Mr. Rawlins passes on to us a private intimation from the headmaster that the new dining-hall is to be opened today to coincide with the great parade of warlike organisations which is to take place through Mynydd Coch later in the day to drum up the savings fever to a peak and to persuade the voters who are starting to look very drowsy into a brighter-eyed view of thrift and preparedness. Mr. Rawlins tells us he will be on the flank of this parade like a lynx watching for any sign of bad behaviour on our part. We believe him. A lynx could learn from Mr. Rawlins. He also says he has noticed a very degenerate look about us lately and he has entered our names for some very healthy farming camp in the summer holidays. A month of stooking and potato picking will have our eyes blazing like torches, the farmers grinning like cats and our fibres rigid and in a mood to dare the world to start something. It would help us too, says Mr. Rawlins, to cancel out those silly supine second thoughts we might have had about the rightness of our imperial design. We say nothing. Our fibres are all his and we can see at a glance that his plans for them are gigantic.

"And throughout this day, do your duty as prefects. Set an example to the lower forms. No snooping off for a smoke to that farther corner of the field. I want you all here."

Off he goes swift as a magician.

"What will he announce next?" asks Wally Wedmore.

"The end of the world, no less," says Sammy. "He's been itching to tell us about it for a long time past."

"What he needs," says Ben, flicking over the pages of both the books in front of him, "is a fortnight in Haiti."

"As a zombie?"

"No, as a Venus worshipper."

"What does that entail that's so bad for Rawlins?"

"It would change his views, boy, change his views as completely as if he had someone at his side knitting him a fresh set.

Do you know, those worshippers spend weeks on end just dedicated to love. Night and day. No work. What wages and mortgages are for us, passion and joy are for them. They take it seriously. They go into training for it, like we do for football, though they don't wear jerseys. Just like an eisteddfod though you don't see the voters up on the stage holding sheet music. Those people live, really live."

"How long do they live?" asks Sammy disgustedly.

"What does it matter how long they live? Look at the people in Mynydd Coch. Some of them look about a hundred and eighty and they've had about five minutes' pleasure in all that time. Look at my grandfather. The only time he smiles is when somebody is dying and he goes upstairs with me and my old man pushing from the back so that he can sit in the bedroom and let his laughter really rip when somebody dies and passes over altogether. When that happens he thinks he's won some kind of competition and he has a laugh that is like a muffled saw and puts you on edge like nibbling fine sand and washing it down with gripe water. He wouldn't even know who Venus was if you brought her into the kitchen shouting her name. The only exciting thing that ever happened to him was when he was being baptised and the preacher fainted and followed him into the tank and somebody with nothing better to do fished them out."

"That Haiti sounds all right," says Bosworth Bowen who is sitting two desks from me drawing a weather map of Europe that looks full of rain.

"It's the place, boy, the only place."

"Better even than Barry or Skegness to go for a treat, I'd say."

"No comparison, boy. What kind of a rapture can you build up on fish and chips?" The thought saddens Benny. His lips pout out and he flings his arms outwards and he extends his fingers as if he wishes to push back the walls of under-vitalised conventions that threaten to hem him in.

"The things men live for!" says Sammy. "Honest to God, think of it. Devoting even the tiniest part of a life to a thing like that."

"You're cold, Sammy, cold as Rawlins." Benny looks at

Sam with a terrible intensity of interest. He has a very great respect for Sam and this has been further complicated by the fact that Sam works at week-ends as a deliverer of green-groceries for Benny's father, a leading seller of fruit and vegetables in the town.

"Oh Sam," says Benny, "what makes you so serious, boy? You worry about everybody, Chinese, Africans, Eskimos, God knows who. Just as if all these poor daubs had taken out some sort of insurance with you. Why don't you have some fun? Just you come down to that Wandle's ballroom on a Saturday night. That would make you sit up."

"It might, on the contrary, make me want to lie down. Those elements at Wandle's are savages, moaning and shuffling. Just another device for creating callousness, a whole tent of it, and in the shadow of that tent, millions suffer."

"They always have, they always will. If you took their sulking and agony away they'd kill you for a spoil-sport. That's the crown of civilisation, the gift of moping for a whole life-time. One day, there'll be nobody left but one man with a drum. He'll be happy, just pure rhythm. Pure because there'll be nobody to dance to it, to slow him down, to make it sweet. You're always on about slums. Slums of the body, you say, slums of the spirit. What's the matter with slums? It's a way of keeping warm. 'Huddle up, huddle up, cuddly babies, Mah love for you is just like rabies.' You know that number?"

"No, thank you, thank God. That's a fine line of reasoning. Slums are warm, warmth is all. The gas-chamber kid. That rhythm has melted your wits."

"Like a monk. That's what you are. Can't stand life in the rhythmic raw. If somebody gave you a raw chicken to eat like they do in that Venus cult to get your tempo up to concert pitch all you'd do is start a fund to get its feathers back. Cold like a monk."

"If a monk had my thoughts, Benny, the rest of his hair would take off and the abbot would shoot him."

"And the abbot would be quite right too. Think and worry, that's your routine. Chewing the fat with those old voters in

the Institute. They marched with the Chartists, those boys, and they've been grumbling about their corns ever since. A proper morgue, that Institute. I went up to that Isaac Lewis the Leg, the librarian, and asked him for that new book 'Strictly the Beat', about the original New Orleans group and he said that he and the committee would rather die than encourage such flippancy."

"Quite right. Strictly the Beat indeed!"

"And how do you relax? When you're not talking a lot of shucklenuts about the soul and the backward races you sit in with that brass and silver band in the Institute playing that clarinet of yours and spreading rigor mortis with pieces like 'Zampa' and 'The Mikado'. God, that stuff!"

"Very nice. We like it."

"What do you get from my old man for the week-ends?"

"Thirty bob."

"And the chance of a hernia lugging that bike about the slopes. Do you know I could get you four pounds a week with that band in Wandle's, if only you'd get from behind the hearse?"

"Look, Benny. My father joined that band at the Institute because he thought a bit of music would be nice for the voters as they lined up to march in the May-Day turn-outs and because he liked the people to come along to the Institute for concerts in winter to be soothed and made happy after a week of conflict and wrinkles, not to send them shooting through some erotic hoop. He taught me the clarinet and I do the same as he did. For me, even the overture to 'Zampa' strikes me as being on the sportive side. A dirge, a bit of simple fingering and all the boys around me blowing like hell and looking so thoughtful and happy, that suits me fine."

"What are you after, Sam. I don't follow you, boy."

"You remember what old Smiley told us last week in the French lesson? Your thoughts were in Cuba and you were not in touch with this division. He was talking about Zola. 'A moment in the conscience of mankind.' For each man to be in himself a guarantor of the whole species. That's what I'm after."

"Dear God. Just like Isaac Lewis the Leg. That's how Isaac talks."

"That's it. To carry, if only for a few seconds of the imagination, the whole burden of man's misery. Not to try to redeem it or anything like that, no, just to get inside the way other people feel and if there's pain in the feeling, to make it less."

"That stuff went out with Dickens," said Leo Warburton, his voice like plums, the very portrait of a shrewd, humane statesman telling the prolies never to let themselves be turned aside from wisdom by envy and greed.

"What was that?" asks Sam sharply, always ready for Leo.

"I said that stuff went out with Dickens."

"Well, it's coming back with Sammy Price," said Sammy.

"It's a matter of simple hygiene, Sam. Let each man clear up for himself the little mess of misery or deprivation on his own doorstep and all will be well. That, I think, has been the lesson of Britain's tremendous social achievement. You don't find small boys being used as human chimney brushes any more, do you?"

"Our flues get wider, Leo. In those days, an odd kid got himself baked in a chimney. Now we bake whole cities, nations, peoples. We are really graduating in heat. And there are even fewer people to make speeches about it in the House of Lords."

"Bring in a raw chicken for Sam, and a couple of steaming sambas," says Benny. "He's wearing his ice cap again."

"But in a way, of course," says Leo, who never really leaves the middle position in any argument, "Sammy's right. There has to be discipline, you know. Restraint and moderation, a *via media*."

"What kind of bus route is that?"

"The golden mean. Not too much here, not too much there. Balance. What the Stoics had."

"I'd like to see the Stoics trying to keep a balance in Mynydd Coch. After six months of this place they'd be as busy in the back lanes as that very passionate bloke with the side-burns, Rowlie Burge the Urge and then winding up in one of the

chapels mixing themselves a cooling mouth-wash of two hundred hymns a night."

"We are put on this earth to think," says Sam, "and then see what it all adds up to."

"To think," says Benny and he beats out a simple march rhythm in his excitement. "That's a prospect, a bright prospect. Thinking's a kind of dropsy. Every time you think, you add something to yourself, you swell, until you get too big in your own view to be alive with comfort. In any case, didn't you hear that piece that Bosworth was reading out from that book about the universe?"

"I've heard Bosworth say a lot of things about the universe, but they were all different. If Bosworth were speaking on behalf of different planets his accounts wouldn't have less in common. Bosworth is a good customer for the prophets."

"But this piece was special. Tell them, Bos."

"I don't know if I got it clear," says Bosworth. "Seemed very confused. The universe, according to that bloke, is a bag. It's getting tired of holding itself upright and of having such a fidgety lot of elements inside. It's getting slack at the edges and a bit malicious too, like an old man that can't stand kids. One day, it'll come down on us."

"You see?" says Ben. "The whole damned lot, down, and us in the middle. It'll go pouff and wind up. You keep on thinking, Sam. A lot of good it'll do you, I'm sure. You keep on thinking. That bag up there, when it isn't too busy getting slack, will enjoy every minute of it. You'll get a bulging brain so you'll have to get somebody to prop your chin up every time you want to eat. And Leo, he'll finish up so restrained he'll be afraid to move at all. Then you'll hear the edges of the bag starting on the final sag and you'll be streaking off for Haiti for a few weeks of intensive homework before the final crash. Let the stars think, boy. They're bigger and brighter than we are. I'd like to be a cat. I know what I want."

Sammy stared at Benny's soft hanging lips.

"And you'll get it too, boy. You know, Benny, you ought to be a Looker, with a special chapel on the tiles."

"Look, Spencer," says Wilf in desperation, "I'm missing all

this. I don't know what this argument is all about. When it started I was still worrying my skull thin about Rawlins."

"In some parts of the world where things are cheaper and warmer and the chapels have less grip than in Mynydd they line up the men and women like football teams."

"Like football teams?"

"So Benny says."

"Very healthy," says Wilf complacently. "Very healthy, football."

"Then they go to it."

"Go to what?"

"They start drumming and eating raw chicken and a very rich diet altogether. Then they go mad with love."

"No!" When Wilf is astonished he always falls back on these absolute denials. "Fancy that now. Good gosh, a sort of free for all." His eyes blink and his hands tremble. "Don't people do some things!"

"They do too."

Then we settle down to read a while in preparation for the history lesson with Mrs. Monroe which comes next. Before the lesson ends we leave the room to help Wilf with the distribution of milk bottles. We find this easier than helping Mrs. Monroe unravel the dilemma of the wise and gentle in such savage areas as these planets. The elements who come to collect the milk bottles for their forms are a riotous and untidy mob. The corridor is a bedlam in no time at all and sounds as if Gordon himself might be standing firm on the stairway promising Mr. Rawlins to hold Khartoum to the last. Wilf has to run to the cloakroom for his long bleached raincoat to protect his navy blue suit from the gushes of milk that come shooting out of the bottles as kids, who seem to like standing in front of Wilf as if he were some kind of an altar, stick their fingers into the lids. This is the morning when payment is supposed to be made for the milk and we catch hold of boys' collars from time to time at signals from Wilf and hold them firmly in line as he looks into his note-book to find who has paid. There are many debates between Wilf and kids who claim to have paid but of whose payments he can find no

record. As we look at the scandalised frown on Wilf's face and listen to these kids stripping off whole layers of lies with an eye to deceiving Wilf we feel that Mrs. Monroe, the history teacher, with occasional contributions from us, will have a lot of unravelling to do.

From the milk duty we turn to the job of shepherding the first form who are quartered in some emergency huts at a short distance from the main school across the road. Then we nip out of the main building for a little freshness before being drawn into the slow peculiar whirl of this day's celebrations. The mid-morning break has been lengthened by fifteen minutes to allow the boys responsible for the sketches a chance to finish their work on the stage in the main hall. This is one of the feeblest stages in the land and Wilfie says he is very glad to hear about this extra time for final touches because they may well mean a few less necks for the fracture ward.

There is a nice surface on the morning as we walk into it. The sky is blue with a promise of grey. We are sorry about the promise. We seem to come across too many things, bodies, minds, already grey with the failure to find any hint of balance. We should be less touchy, less aware. We know that. But people get their lips right inside our ears and scream about the simple fact of their consciousness. Our days, our times, are one long screech, not good for spirit or tympanum.

We walk to the steep grassy embankment at the other end of the playing-pitch and we sit there trying to make our voices heard above the din of a hundred other boys who are also sitting there. The sky's changes draw our eyes. It is clean and apparently without any of those reservations that so many people keep kennelled around their premises.

Beyond the school wall a farmer is running a tractor up a steep field and shouting to its engine as if it were still a horse. We talk about crops, creation and Mr. Rawlins.

CHAPTER III

A SMALL BOY comes running up to tell us that Mr. Swayle, the senior master, would like to see all prefects. We are scattered in many different places. Some of us are lying on the embankment, several in the toilets smoking or learning oddments about life discussed by the groups of elements who seem to make that place their home from home and take a lot of shifting.

When we all contact Mr. Swayle we find him annoyed. This is not usual. He is a stout man with a hugely broad face. He was at one time an athlete of note and a Rugby player often stared at by those members of the Rugby world who select the teams that tear the hair off other teams of hair-tearers in international jousts. There is not that appearance of grey slate about Mr. Swayle which is common in this area. It may be due to excessive fat and an over-sudden withdrawal from violent exercise. It may equally well be boredom. His subject is mathematics but he has not yet won through to whatever may be exciting in this field. He does just enough to keep himself and his pupils awake and tries not to be hit by falling blackboards. His eyes light up at the mention of two things only: Rugby, in whose cause he would damn all book culture to the devil of effeminacy by whom all books are sired, and preaching. This last item is not as strange as at first it sounds. The Rugby players of Mynydd Coch, while never subtle and often going in for heavy swearing and drinking on their away fixtures, boast a rough piety at home, and we know from several monologues that Mr. Swayle connects atheism with a lack of muscle and a tendency to forward passing.

"Give me a boy," he says in those moments when he bothers to level any kind of a formula at life, "give me a boy who kicks a straight ball and sings a lusty hymn."

Mr. Swayle represents a strong, primitively vigorous streak

in the religious life of Mynydd Coch which keeps a sharp eye on the shudders of its soul, reports these shudders to God in rhyming and harmonised progress-reports and then relaxes by going out and breaking a neighbour's arm or hitting somebody silly. Theology as a science has as little interest for Mr. Swayle as mathematics, and his great passion is to collect anecdotes about noted preachers of the past. To those who have heard and loved these preachers these anecdotes are no doubt full of interest and even charm, but to those brought up in a brisker tradition they seem to need a spell in the iron lung even more than they do a narrator. But they have unquestionably soothed and comforted Mr. Swayle during days when he has felt his body sick with its middle-aged stillness and his mind mocked by the wearisome and functionless litany of theorems in which he sees little purpose. He favours stories that show these preachers off-duty and in a human light; being sworn at by the unwary and coming back at the unwary with a hot flow of spiced banter picked up through long nights of wassail at one or other of our University Colleges. Whatever the effect of these stories on other people, and we have seen sophisticates like Benny Turner go green as the mountainside, they never fail to ring the bell for Mr. Swayle. By the time he is half-way through the tale he is more than half-way to the floor, helpless with glee and sliding with noisy rub of serge on wood off the chair. Another type of story coming under this head is the one showing preacher or parson taking a drink. In the days when Mr. Swayle used to teach us and we wished to avoid some trouble connected with home-work or advanced figuring, all we had to do was to invent some bit of buffoonery starring one of the better-known divines. We made quite a list of them and used them according to their quality and the depth of the trouble we were in. If we expected to be shellacked up aisle and down for bad work we would bring forward one into which a fair labour had gone. "Please, sir, my father would like to know if you have heard the following one about the Rev. D.D.?" "The Rev. D.D.? I know a couple of beauties about him myself. What's this one now? Out with it." And out it would come. "And these deacons were mean beyond,

see? They wouldn't give D.D. as much coal as he wanted and it was a freezing winter. Terrible cold. So one Sunday D.D. frozen to the marrow crawled into the pulpit, his teeth chattering so much he had to grip on the lectern before he could hear the organ over the castanet rattle of his shiver. Then when he was due to start, he said 'My job here, friends and brethren, from what I can make out, is to warn you against hell, the warm place, you know. For myself, I am keeping an open mind.' " That one was relatively abstruse and it took a good thirty seconds before Mr. Swayle started shaking and making for the floor. Or it might be a tale as simple and without forethought as a fall from a wall. "And so this hot day, old D.D. walked into the buffet, saw his friend with a full pint, seized it, drained it, turned his eyes up to the ceiling and said 'They'll understand, up there.' "

As an audience no man has ever come up to scratch as consistently as Mr. Swayle. There is hunger for the past in his love for these tales and when he tells them or hears them he fixes us with a thoughtful look and says:

"Those were golden days, better than the ones you'll know, much better."

Our only contact with him now is when he has to rally us as prefects and give us directives on behalf of the headmaster. He has little ambition to exercise his authority and he often finds that the lithe and willing Mr. Rawlins has beaten him to the post. He regards Mr. Rawlins without malice but with a wonder as deep as ours. Without having between Mr. Swayle and ourselves the entanglement of a subject to be studied we find him a man of great kindness, anxious to hear about our problems and eager to exert himself in their solution. He is for life lived at a quiet and decent tempo and does not, like Mr. Rawlins and some of the others, keep urging us to an ever higher sense of service. His dominant mood, when not distracted by some professional detail, is a sickness of spirit for the homely society of the West country from which he came. In that mood he rests in a deep sorrowful quietude.

We file into the room where he awaits us.

"It's not more difficult to get in touch with the dead than to

assemble you boys when you are needed. Discipline isn't what it used to be since they made Rugby optional."

We apologise, mumbling stories of dilatory messengers and young offenders on the grass bank needing to be chased.

"You know the new dining hall?" asks Mr. Swayle.

We nod. We have been hearing of it for a long time past. It is a semi-prefabricated building being put up in a corner of the playing field. We have heard it will be open at the beginning of next term. We can see that Leo is on the point of telling Mr. Swayle that Mr. Rawlins has already broken the news about the dining-hall to us but Mr. Swayle cuts him off with a raising of the arm.

"Yes, I know. Mr. Rawlins told you. If I get the job of announcing the crack of doom Mr. Rawlins will be handing out the secret ahead of me. He is a born herald. Anyway, I was due to make this announcement and nothing but a heavy fall of roof is going to stop me. They've made a lot of unexpected progress with this dining-hall. The contractor found bits of the building swinging into place even without his knowing. Seems he hadn't properly grasped the principles of prefabrication. He's standing in a corner down there now, looking astonished and saying there is more in these modern methods than meets the eye. The floor, the roof, the tables are definitely in order. The kitchen staff have moved in."

"Already?" asks Leo.

"It's a big surprise. The headmaster took the decision to open at the beginning of the week after a chat with the contractor about modern methods. He means to have the first dinner served there today. This will give the day a look of festivity and strike a proper note for the savings campaign."

"That's an excellent idea," says Leo.

"It's the headmaster's idea. He wants to see the whole sixth form down at the old dining-hall in ten minutes' time."

We make our way towards this assignation. The old dining-room looks old. It is the most desolate-looking bit of building in the whole school. It sums up in a few thousand bored and peeling bricks the whole workhouse flavour of public planning in the period that saw it come to birth. It stands on the side

of the path that leads up to the clinker patch which we call the playing-field. We all go in and take seats. The tiny kitchen in a corner in which all the cooking had been done is now empty of its stoves, shelves, sinks. We are surprised at the swift and total quality of the stripping that has been done. It is funny to see the place looking as bare as this for we have grown used to the sight of it after years spent in the school dining scheme, lining up at the kitchen door waiting to have our dinners handed out.

"So we won't eat here any more," says Sammy Price quietly, and prompted by the dramatic thoughtfulness of his tone we all look around and take a reflective interest in the room which is now to be abandoned. It is a quaint and stricken room. The windows are tall, dirty with the webbing pasted on to them at the beginning of the war to lessen the danger of splintered glass which does not go well with the thick sort of soup they serve us in school. In a far dark corner of the room are two great vats on brick supports. These vats have nothing at all to do with the dinner scheme and are technically out of bounds. They are a relic of the days when the school was mixed and this room was given over to domestic science courses for the girls.

"Have you chaps noticed," asks Leo, "how full the world is of things which are not used but which people won't bestir themselves to shift?"

"Oh yes," says Wilf. "What were you thinking of particularly, Leo?"

"Those vats. They have a sombre and horrible look."

"They were left there to sadden the diners," says Spence. "Sadden them and curdle their guts into humility."

"An hour's boiling of selected councillors would soon have them torn down and carted away," says Sammy.

We fall silent. The vats claim our attention. They look as Leo said they look. They sum up all the aspects of dirty inadequacy that is the main theme of this room. It is a piece of the death that is rattling like clappers in the throat of the workhouse tradition. There are four tables and eight benches in the room. The furniture has never been enough to cope at

one time with the heavy volume of diners. Since the years of poverty in the valley began with the closing down of pits there have never been less than three hundred boys having dinner. Most of them, before the war, had their dinners free because the County Council judged that parents who were on the Social Insurance, and in that period those parents who were not there were simply taking a little longer time than most getting around to it, could not afford to provide all our meals. So rather than have the country's education braked to a grinding standstill by large schoolfuls of kids faint with famine and quietly chewing at each other during the slower lessons, they enrolled us in this scheme. But since the war, with death and work reviving all around the world, we have had to pay. At first it gave us a flat, grotesque feeling to be paying for dinners in a place as cheerless as this.

The walls were once cream-washed and are now shading off into a general darkness. The woodwork is covered with carved names and the walls are free only in their upper distances from pencilled or chalked slogans and single words either meaningless or smutty. There is more than one boy has learned the facts of life or at least how to write while lounging about that dining-hall waiting for his prunes. Among the bits of writing you see darker marks where someone has thrown a fragment of dinner at a comrade and missed the target. There is an air of prime decadence and indignity about the whole place. There has never been, in our memory, enough beauty in this place to steady and refine the impulses of any of those who ate there save the few who go about holding their impulses aloft demanding such treatment, showing themselves to be in a chronic state of wanting to be improved. As we sit there we remember dinner hours that were wet and unspeakable. On fine days the boys who could not get into the first batch waited their turn in a queue on the path outside, swinging like apes from the surrounding walls, from the eaves of the dining-hall roof, peering in through windows and fanlights in a way that would give you indigestion as fast as the sight of the vats if the face of the peerer caught you unprepared with a difficult mouthful. We have known even strong weight-lifting types

like Meirion Farr to be put clean off their food by the racket kicked up by those queues of diners. But on wet days more than the normal quota had to be crowded into each batch. Six or seven were manœuvred on to benches made for five. The gas would be put on. The mantles were rarely intact. They gave a light that tickled the darkness into a bitter laughter, no more, and showed you where to go to put them out. The cooks from the tiny kitchen kept up a stream of half-screamed complaints at the extra demands on their cramped space and shabby equipment. On the benches it was a matter of brute force, cunning and luck whether or not you stayed in position long enough to finish your meal. Small boys were put for pity's sake in the middle, for at the ends they would be swept off like chaff by the dynamic arms or buttocks of larger neighbours. It was very interesting to watch the progress of these smaller boys as they went to work in the middle of a benchful of boys all struggling to get nearer the centre, where stability and peace were supposed to be found. At first the small boys' arms would maintain a steady motion from plate to mouth. Then as the pressure from both sides grew more deadly the small boy would find fewer and fewer of his veins willing to have anything to do with his blood. We would see the ancient Mynydd Coch pallor of his features heighten its tone. His arms would slow down to an odd, writhing helplessness. His hands would paw about in the air for a few courageous seconds then the cutlery would clatter down from fingers utterly cramped. When that point was reached the cadaverous little diner was hoisted out and put to sit on the lip of one of the vats by the master on duty to have his limbs slapped and beaten back to life. If one sat on the end of a bench, one was always liable to provide some rough comedy by lifting food to the mouth and being swept clean off the bench with the mouthful still a foot away from home. On very busy days the best method was to use one hand only for scooping up the food and keep the other grasped around the table-leg in the manner of an anchor. If the pressure became intolerable then at least the table went with you when you started to move. We are not sorry that there will be no more meals served in the old

dining-hall. Even the numbest of us sensed a certain hint of insult in the squawling sloppiness of its arrangements.

The headmaster comes in followed by Mr. Rawlins. The headmaster is wearing his cap as well as gown. We know from this that he is functioning today mainly as a metaphor and most of the talking will be done by Mr. Rawlins. He wears his cap only when he wishes to overawe or when the downward-blowing draughts which are plentiful from the school's tall window strike too savagely at his half-bald head. He looks around the dining-hall with disgust. We feel that he puts most of the blame for its appearance of shadowed squalor on us.

"Today," he says, in a voice as carefully poised as a boxer's fist, "marks a milestone in the history of the school's dining scheme. This is an age of transitions. As in the great world, so here. We are leaving a bit of the old and advancing to a part of the new. But let us not forget the profoundly valuable lessons that the old has to teach us . . ." I can hear Sammy Price's mind asking us what kind of goats we'd be if we lived honestly according to the lessons we have learned in the trip-and-stab environment of this dining-hall. The headmaster has never seemed to bother himself very much with this side of the school. He infers from the fact that we walk about and write a little that we must be eating something off and on. We have only seen him once before in the dining-room and then he looked so astonished at the general lay-out of the place that he had to be told that we did not line up in that farther corner to eat directly out of the vats.

"Mr. Rawlins has concerned himself specially with the problems and welfare of the diners and I will leave him to explain to you what help we expect of you when the change-over is made. And do not forget. The great new advances in our educational system which are now to be given the substance of reality will depend for their durability upon the energy and goodwill of those who will receive the benefits of these measures."

He leaves us with Mr. Rawlins. Mr. Rawlins looks as keenly earnest as ever we have seen him. He begins as he always does with a question. It would seem that at the beginning of every

fresh phase of intercourse with his fellow men he believes in laying down a certain acreage of bewilderment as his field of rest.

"What have you noticed most about this dining-room?"

"Food," says Benny Turner, always simple in his approach. Most of us nod, thinking that Benny is on the mark there.

"The vats," says Sammy.

"The dark," says Wilfie. "On a wet day here it gets so dark you don't know what you're going to bite next. I've had some very funny things between my teeth since this scheme started."

"No, no, no," shouts Mr. Rawlins, stamping his foot on the floorboards. "You have tortuous, sinister minds, you boys, all of you. One day you will give me the answer I expect and I will die of shock. The most noticeable thing about this dining scheme has been the oafish, I might say almost cannibal, conduct of the diners. Why is that?"

"Well," says Sammy. "The place looks like a slum and the kids act accordingly."

"A slum?" Mr. Rawlins is blinking hard. "Do you realise, Price, that you are talking about a part of the school?"

"Yes, sir. Look at that corner where the vats are. After two helpings of potato you are looking straight at the witches, and after the rice you are shaking hands with Macbeth and wiping your other hand on his kilt."

"Your mind has an obscene, subversive tilt, Price. Never does it occur to you to seek the root of vileness within the vile. We live in a world of shabby and misleading excuses. Look at the thousands of names on those tables and benches, bitten out by teeth as often as carved by knives. Ten years ago there were fine Biblical prints hung around these walls. They had to be removed for shame's sake, defaced by ruffians who had forsworn the habit of reverence and had goaded their dupes to assault every sign of holiness. You could see the weaker-witted being cajoled by the godless out there in the queue, lined up at the door and launched against the prints. Look at those gravy marks. They show something more than a mere daring of technique with the fork. It would almost seem to suggest that we run a special dining scheme for pupils who can

only eat when climbing up vertical surfaces, over so wide an area is gravy distributed between the floor and the ceiling. Barbarism, no less. And the noise I've heard here! Boys gibbering at you through the windows as you are in the very act of eating. It shows a lack of civilisation in the background of many of our boys. In the past it could rightly be said that part of the blame could be laid on the defects of this building. Now we are to have a new start. There will be ample space and light in the new premises. There will no longer be any excuse for the boy who eats his own and two adjacent dinners on the plea that it is too dark to tell his plate from the others. There will no longer be a defence for the boor who literally aims food at his mouth and in the course of some convulsion hits a neighbour or the wall. There will be grace and beauty in the new hall and a new era in manners is going to begin for Mynydd Coch and not before time. We can say goodbye to the days when it was considered snobbish to use both knife and fork except for throats. And in remedying the evils of the past, one thing must take precedence over all others. What is it?"

We all have an answer but do not give it. Mr. Rawlins has already told us that he has long since given up all hope of ever getting the right response from us. In relation to the Classical columns of his own smooth concepts, we are perverse, strange, Gothic. "Grace," says Mr. Rawlins, solemn as a fifty-guinea hearse. "Haven't you boys noticed what must be the most shocking omission in the whole activity of this school? For the last eight years, under the cloak of a cowardly inertia, Grace, the most significant part of any act of communal feeding, has been in abeyance."

Frankly we have not noticed. We belong, with one or two exceptions, either to dourly nonconformist homes where a dipping of heads over bread would be considered a reversion to ritual of the most hairy kind or to homes where the light of old beliefs went out and failed to report back a generation ago, or where no need at all is seen to offer up thanks for a food supply which has shown itself over the years to be fundamentally poor. As for saying grace in this dingy room, we have felt no urge. All we have felt is a certain strictly secular gratitude if

we are able to get seated on a bench with enough room to manipulate a spoon, chew and find a neighbour who has no wish to break your leg. "Without this act of collective thanksgiving, performed with absolute reverence, there can be no restraint, no discipline. Today a new dispensation begins. I have agitated on this point for years but there can no longer be any evasion of our responsibility in the matter."

Then follow a few technical details of what duties we are to perform in the course of shepherding the diners into their new home.

"You are a pampered crew, really," says Mr. Rawlins. "Blessings are showered on you, men wear their hearts and fingers to the last fibre on your skulking behalf and you are never grateful."

"Oh yes, sir, yes, sir."

"Let's hope so."

"But what, sir, is to become of this old dining-room?" asks Leo.

"It will be used for classes. There will be more pupils admitted year by year from now on. Wisely or not the franchise of culture will be widened. There will be extra classrooms needed. This room will be ideal." He looks around. He looks as if he really means what he is saying. "A fine lovely old room."

CHAPTER IV

As the boys come out of the assembly hall, we marshal them in the yard. Mr. Rawlins is coursing like a whippet, asking everyone where his whistle has gone. He is lost without it. When handling boys in the mass he can shrill terror into them with this instrument. We are not sorry when we see no one knows the whereabouts of the thing. Mr. Rawlins tells us it has probably been stolen by some Pict, some swift ravager who wishes to continue in the new dining-hall the same condition of piggish anarchy as prevailed in the old. Rightly sensing Mr. Rawlins' whistle to be an emblem of order, reason and calm, the nameless Pict has flogged it.

The kids are greatly excited by all this marshalling and there is a cheer every time Mr. Rawlins passes this group or that. A few hungry ones, the fixed percentage of tape worms in every company, react savagely to all this fuss and delay and accuse us with oaths that drive Mr. Rawlins blue and frantic when he overhears them of trying to do them out of their dinner. He tells us it is hungry they should be forever, hungry and cast forth, these obscene and ungrateful ones. We agree, to dull our own wrath at the noise and confusion. We say everyone should be grateful. Oddly narcotic is gratitude.

We begin the march. We have to ascend a steep section of path before we get to the playing-field proper. In the sense of a grass-covered patch this field is not a field at all. It is a roughly flattened area shovelled out of the hillside and covered with cinders. It is the sort of playing field which you would expect in a place like Mynydd Coch where a steady diet of natural and social disasters like excessive rain and over-crude toil have led the people to some intense thought about hell and how to keep in trim for its avoidance. There is not much to be said for this patch as a place where a large number of school-boys are expected to play every known British game in

addition to a few that have not yet been openly recognised by the British. A hard fall on it and you get your skin full of hard, lacerating clinker and you stand looking scratched and pitted, like a living relative of a fruit cake, with your friends standing by wondering whether to start winkling out the cinders or dumping you on the nearest fire as a patent-fuel briquette. Boys who do a lot of falling go through life with a gritty taste and are often bitter and unhappy. There is now some talk of macadamising the patch as part of a general policy of keeping out the cinders and letting in the fractures. At least as things are now we mostly come through with our bones intact.

There is a good deal of slipping and stumbling by the little army of diners as they make their way up the steep path that leads to the patch. The soil here is clayey and a yesterday of rain has made the surface tricky. We get a lot of back-chat from kids who have gone sliding on to their backs and want to know what the hell is the point of all this. Up on the field, we marshal them again. The hungry are now trumpeting like small elephants and Mr. Rawlins is a deeper and more striking blue as he goes from point to point roaring at them to shut up. One or two do this, being hoarse or dog-tired, and they are personally thanked by Mr. Rawlins and us.

A few of us go into the new dining-hall. It is a T-shaped structure larger than we thought it would be. We notice that it cuts a short slice out of the limits of the Rugby pitch. With this reduced space for the movements of our athletes we can see even fewer decisive battles for the Empire being won on the playing fields of Mynydd Coch. We can also see some of our fleetest Rugby wings doing a lot of touching down when they come to the dining-hall if only for the reason that they will have cracked their heads into total coma against the wall of the hall and because it is difficult to keep on running even with a Rugby ball when you are carrying a dining-hall along with you, even one of light fabric and thrown up according to the most modern principles. The hall inside is painted cream and green. The ceiling is not as high as in the old place but the broad and plentiful windows give it a clean and brilliantly lit

look. The tables are covered with cloths of a yellow and green check pattern and remind us pleasantly of similar ones we saw in a classy chip-bar on a bus-outing down to the Gower peninsula. The benches are small, slight and seemingly built without much thought for the size and temperament of some of the performers who will be sitting on them here. We can see trouble in ten shades of crimson arising between these frail benches and some of the diners who will not be able to shed the habits of the old régime. On each table there is a vase of flowers. This is also going to come as a surprise if not a shock to some of the more sullen and reactionary elements. Around the walls are hung twenty paintings in light unvarnished frames. These paintings are coloured with a richness that is strange to us, evoking for a moment a hurtful sorrow that it should be so strange. Even from our position near the door the beauty of these works comes out and touches us. Mr. Rawlins notices that the paintings have caught our eye.

"They will give a new tone altogether," he says. "All expensive and all chosen with taste and care."

We hear a hammering from somewhere above us.

"Someone on the roof," says Leo with quick earnestness as if afraid that someone will let the school down by asking what is going on in the cellar.

"Not on the roof. Between the roof and the ceiling. There is a man fixing in the electric lights. You can see the wires. Look."

We look. From a dozen tiny holes in the ceiling hang lengths of flex. We are impressed by all this up-to-date efficiency but hope that there is nothing deadly in this flex to the hand that grasps it or we can see ourselves carrying out shrivelled diners by the score because those boys cannot resist the sight of anything dangling down. They have to tug it if it is the last thing they do. "It is the only part of the work not yet quite complete. Mr. Trigg, the electrician, tells me he is hastening the work. He is up there now between the ceiling and roof, flexing and connecting for dear life, helped by Teifion Timms whom you will all remember as having once been a pupil of this school and who is now doing well as a helper to Mr. Trigg.

Mr. Trigg tells me he will be using only the highest class of bulb. There will be none of the old gloom here. That had a lot to do with the pagan ways of the diners in the old hall, I will aver. Bad light goes a long way to explain the type of neurosis which allows a boy who has spilled his helping of first vegetable over the leg of your trousers to spill his second vegetable over the other leg. Here there will be light."

There is a finality about Mr. Rawlins that is good to hear.

"What's the ceiling made of, Mr. Rawlins?" asks Wilf, listening to the loud stamping and hammering of Mr. Trigg and Teifion Timms.

"Asbestos board."

"Is it safe for the electrician up there, sir?"

"Safe as a bank. A new building fabric, this asbestos. Hygienic and highly adaptable. If Trigg were the same kind of clumsy oaf we specialise in producing here he would be coming through every time he took a step or struck a blow with the hammer. His leg and that of Timms would be dangling through in as many places as the flex. But these workmen are trained to know where to tread. They have cat walks, boards that allow them to avoid the weaker sections of the ceiling." He raises his voice nervously, as if trying to remind Trigg about the cat-walks.

"Now then," says Mr. Rawlins. "Let the boys in by driblets. If only I had my whistle! By driblets. . . ."

While we are deciding the size of a driblet the whole body of diners comes surging in through the doorway and we are engulfed. We fall back shouting on the kids to watch out for the tables and benches. Between excitement at the sight of all this novelty and hunger the kids are in no mood for delay or for debate with us and they keep flooding in, setting up a twitter-rumble storm of half-broken voices as they bring each other's attention to the paintings and the striking colours of the tablecloths. Two benches, a table and a jarful of dog daisies go to the floor. Mr. Rawlins is now like Cassandra at the stage where she really enjoys being off the hinge. There is foam around his mouth and in most other ways he looks like a spring tide. The

passion of his rage must have an electric quality because the invasion of bodies stops and there is a sudden hush in the hall. Mr. Rawlins makes haste to exploit this advantage. This silence is one of nature's freaks and he knows it. He gets hold of two kids, any two. The two selected look harmless enough to us but he beats their heads together with great force and noise. The kids stare glassily at each other and promise to see later whether they came out of the crash with the same brains as they had when they went in. Then Mr. Rawlins points at the smashed flower-jars and his despair sends speech into a void, velvet-lined, and we can hear his wrath fingering its rounded softness. He picks up the flowers and beats the same two boys savagely over the heads with one of the dog daisies. The water from the stem splashes on their faces. The boys grin. The stem is cool and without hurt; they like it. It is very refreshing after that clout of skull on skull. Mr. Rawlins sees that the diners are preparing to view this dog daisy turn as the hit of the month and that he will do no good along this line. He gets up on one of the benches, wanting to say a few words that may drop profitably into the momentary well of stillness. We look closely at the bench on which he has taken his stand. It is certainly of a fragile, utility type, not meant as a platform for grown men carrying a heavy load of indignation. The bench has legs that can be let down. We notice that one leg of the bench Mr. Rawlins has chosen has not been properly adjusted and looks likely to buckle under any untoward motion or pressure. We gesture to him by way of warning, Wilfie leading the field with the least suggestive attempt ever made to render with hands and feet the falling of a bench. But Mr. Rawlins does not heed us at all. He is standing there like Rienzi, mouth open, arms upraised. We are in for some scalding rhetoric about the quality of our generation.

"Now then," he starts and gets no farther. There is a sharp crack as the bench leg snaps into parallel and Mr. Rawlins disappears from the view of the hundred or so boys who are craning their necks to see and hear him. He falls nimbly. He lies flat on the bench staring at the white ceiling, the fingers of

one hand outstretched in the water spilled from the flower vase. In the other hand he is still clutching the dog daisy which he used to give the ironical thrashing to the two boys. Stretched out like this Mr. Rawlins makes a pretty cameo. We all get an idea of how much more striking and varied life could be if it tried. Hoisted up and nailed into position he would be a fit companion for the many excellent paintings we have around the walls. The silence is greater now than it was before. We can hear the electrician above us clomping about on the cat walks.

"Have a care there, Teifion," we can hear Mr. Trigg shouting. We have seen this Teifion walking about the school with a great roll of flex around his shoulders like a euphonium and despite what Mr. Rawlins said we do not think this Teifion is very bright. Mr. Trigg probably thinks the sound of the bench collapsing was Teifion putting his foot or arm through some or another part of the asbestos roofing, proving that he has no great faith in Teifion.

"Let them in," says Mr. Rawlins quietly. We expected more than that. We had looked forward at least to seeing him pin on to one of his traditional butts like Wilfie a charge of having kicked the bench from beneath him.

In they come. The benches fill up. The benches seem safer now that Mr. Rawlins' experience has given most of the boys an urge to get down on them gingerly. The noise is more intense than it was in the old hall. We put this down to the lowness of the ceiling. A few benches collapse in one of the farther corners, but when we are sent by Mr. Rawlins to deal with the elements involved we find they are old offenders who are hardly ever off the floor wherever they chance to be. They seem to feel, these boys, that man made a heavy blunder when he engaged in the costly folly of walking proudly upright at an angle of ninety degrees and more to an earth which must be warmer and friendlier to creatures who keep their stomachs on it most of the time. The noise seems to gather in bunches about the ceiling and then drop like a snaring sack around the ears. The flower vases create a big hit. Such things have never been seen on school dining-tables before and I hear some kids

saying they think all this splendour has probably been left over from some gala or other. But the flowers do not cause the aesthetic hush forecast by Mr. Rawlins. They become instead the storm centre of some simple-witted horseplay. The hungrier elements make as if to eat the flowers and drink the water and when their audience has turned away or is laughing too much to be paying close attention they do actually take a nibble and a hurried sip. These performers are certainly worth watching. On the lower levels of buffoonery, they have a bold novelty.

Two large cream-painted hatches connect the dining-hall with the kitchen. We have taken a peep inside and shouted greetings to the women-cooks. We have never before seen such various and heavy equipment for preparing food. It is all electrically run and the cooks are and look baffled. In the old kitchen they had no more than about four square feet in which to move about and often enough they themselves had to be half-way on the stoves to make way for the food. There used to be some scenes of rare confusion in that tiny kitchen. It was always as uncertain as a raffle what exactly would come out cooked. But one thing that struck Mrs. Willis, the chief cook, about the old arrangement was that when you yourself were forced by lack of room to spend some of your time as directly above the jets as the vegetables you had a pretty good idea when things were done. When you were ready to scream the kids could come and have it. We can see the cooks now as the hatches are rolled back, all looking as lost as the tribes of Israel. They walk about the unaccustomed floor space fiddling about with a switch here and there, and then bending down and listening attentively to discover what will happen. Most of the civilisation of Mynydd Coch is still run on gas and the popular fancy still connects electricity with this or that brand of death. Mrs. Willis is fascinated by two large wheels attached to one of the stoves.

"I've got a notion about those," she says, directing the eyes of Spence and myself to the wheels.

"What notion is that?" we ask.

"Turn this one to the right and that one to the left and the

whole damned lot goes up. And no regrets from me either. We grumbled a lot about the other little cubby-hole but I wish to God I was back there. I am homesick for the sight of that nice smelly black little hole, honest I am. The man who was to come and tell us how all this works is ill and can't come, so we got to proceed by touch, so to speak, dying en route, as the saying goes. Look at Alice Maude, she's been sitting in that corner there for half an hour half-paralysed, afraid of getting a shock and talking about some voter down in Coronation Row who got her hair scorched off. Jessie May, she cleaned all the potatoes by hand then put them all into the potato cleaner and expected them to boil. And Clarisse went home out of it all. She had got so used to the smallness of the other place and to the sight of somebody's neck in front of your teeth all the time making you wonder if it were done, she kept fainting at the sight of so much open floor space. The distances trick me too. I keep putting things on shelves. It's only when I hear something crashing on the floor I realise I've still got a yard or so to go before getting to the shelf. A change as sudden as this is like toothache. It pains. We've put the stuff in and we're hoping we put it into the right places. We're going to take it out when time's up and if it's still there. It'll be a miracle if it's done properly, so have patience."

"We'll have patience, Mrs. Willis. Don't worry. We'll get a prayer organised at every table."

"You're good kids."

Out in the hall Mr. Rawlins is hammering away at a table. The acoustics of this long room are strange and despite the fact that Mr. Rawlins is contorting his face to endure the pain from his hammered fingers there are sections of the hall where Mr. Rawlins might as well be on the moon for all the impression he makes on these distant diners. Between air pockets, fidgeting feet and rumbling stomachs he is fighting a grim battle.

"When the hatches are thrown officially open," he bawls and by the remote straining look on his face we begin to think he really is on the moon, "when the hatches are thrown officially open, no more than four boys will stand at each hatch

at a time. There must be no crowding, no congestion. Any tomfoolery and the fool goes through the door like a bullet. There must be dignity, discipline."

The mention of these last two items reminds him of something. His face colours swiftly as if the omission is something of which he should be abjectly ashamed. He calls us senior boys around him like a shield.

"The Grace. We are forgetting the Grace."

We all nod to each other. We realise that this is going to take a lot of putting over. We wish Mr. Rawlins had let the diners get used to the cleanliness, the light, the flowers and the paintings, the stern anguish of queueing up in small groups at a hatch, before breaking them into this utterly new and delicate refinement. He bangs on the table again. We hope he has changed his mind and decided to have 'Land of My Fathers' at the end of the meal. Only four or five tables around get the gist of what he is saying. There is a record hubbub. I can see only one boy who is not talking and he has an elbow in his mouth and is fighting hard to add his note to the clamour. The few who are near Mr. Rawlins see the play of his arms as he motions them to rise. Five tables rise and ten benches go down. Mr. Rawlins has his eyes tightly closed. From the racket of the benches he gathers that the entire assembly of diners is now on its feet and ready to join him. But the rest of the diners remain seated their attention drawn by the rattle of benches and the standing group. They see Mr. Rawlins' body relax in a gesture of submission to a higher will. Then they see his face suffused with a look of almost idiot reverence. Then he begins the prayer, with an exaggerated clarity of tone that distorts his features into the most notable shapes. The boys who are still seated knowing nothing of the context of this performance watch with interest thinking that Mr. Rawlins is trying to work something out in connection with the new scheme or simply that this is some kind of turn with which Mr. Rawlins is helping them fill in the interval of waiting.

"Oh he's a scream, aye," says a red-faced boy in one of the corners. "You can't beat old Rawlins. He's a real toy."

And then without malice and with a sincere desire to praise and encourage Mr. Rawlins in all he is doing to make their cramped obscure lives smoother and better lighted, they begin to laugh.

"I knew it," says Spence to me. "He should have spent a whole week with nothing else on the cards but explaining this thanksgiving caper to them individually with charts, simple words and smoke signals. Now there'll be hell, Mynydd Coch's first and finest *auto da fé*."

"Think you're right, boy."

The sound of the laughter takes a curiously long time reaching Mr. Rawlins. There is no doubt that his whole self had been joyously, raptly dedicated to the victory of this first public Grace in the new Hall, no doubt that he has spent years of bitter humiliation since conditions made it necessary to abandon Grace in the old hall. The laughter is right in his ears now, like a dark, heavy, oppressive lubricant. We see the submissive piety peeling from his face. He opens one of his eyes to see what is going on. We see horror and hatred trooping into his expression swinging a heavy club. He falls silent. On his face we can see the painful gulf between the mood wrought by his thanksgiving and the passionate helpless dislike he is feeling for the unamenable, spoiled mob in front of him. We can almost smell the hot rub of the splenetic loathing inside his head. If his eye chances to light on the right face, some round, bland, grinning, indifferent blob of face, we can see Mr. Rawlins launching the prime Jihad of all times, crowning the diners with a flower jug apiece, pressing irreverent heads into the potato cleaner to bring them forth earless. He calls us to him once again. His voice when he speaks is astonishingly low and restrained. It sounds as if we are listening in to his very soul. It is eerie, especially when taken together with the mood of frustration we felt on hearing of Mrs. Willis' difficulties with the switches and wheels and shelves.

"These barbarians wish to defeat us," he says and Julius could not have done that sentence any better. "They want no new ways, no finer ways. We will teach them. This dissolute

heedlessness is a gangrene. Leave it unchecked and the whole of our inherited culture goes down to ruin and decay. We will teach them. Take a table each. At a signal from me you will all start banging. That will bring them all to their feet. Then there will be silence, a silence as of death. Then there will be Grace."

We take up our stations, keeping an eye on Mr. Rawlins. He is looking more than ever magisterial. His fierce eye and jutting underlip have already settled for the four or five tables nearest to him. They are waiting, heads thrust forward, to see him do something really memorable, blow up, start to float or something richly macabre connected with the imposing battery of doors and knobs and levers they see through the hatches in Mrs. Willis' department. We can hear questions bristling up from the thickets of heads around us.

"What the hell's going on now, Spence?"

"Come on, Leo. Where's the grub, boy?"

"What are we doing up here in this place, Wilf? Let's go down to the old dining-hall. There's a bit of system and food down there."

"What are the flowers for, Wally? Who's dead, boy?"

"What's Rawlins' game, Iorwerth?"

We see Mr. Rawlins raise his arm. We start banging on the table that has been allotted to us. There is a moment's danger that the tables will cave in or that the kids will think this is a new sort of game and join in. But we take care to stop quickly. The silence flows over the hall, rapid, lithe as water. Mr. Rawlins' voice rises and hovers like a hawk.

"Stand, one and all!"

This time everyone stands. At every table where size or caution does not limit clumsiness the light unsteady benches go to the floor. We feel the manufacturers of these benches, sick and tired of dutifully making things through the centuries to keep people off the floor have exploited the world-shrinkage of primary materials to work off a long-rankling urge to plant a pretty jape on the head of humanity. But we make little of this. They are standing: that is the main thing. Now Mr. Rawlins can work his aching will upon them and he will know, we

suppose, some kind of happiness that will bring him and, through him, us, some kind of peace. In this age a few things tumbling here and there do not bother us much personally. As long as we ourselves, the tables and the roof remain in their proper places we think we are doing quite well. Mr. Rawlins repeats his Grace. A small number of boys keep their heads down and their eyes closed. The rest observe this and do the same, doing a little winking now and then to keep track of this strange situation. There is a moved, sincere thankfulness in Mr. Rawlins' tone that heightens the sense, strong in us all, of being on a record safari into the scrub of sharp, hostile unusualness. Everyone sits down again.

The hatches are declared open. Dozens of diners move towards them to get the loaded plates that are arranged on the counter. We come down on them like sheep dogs.

"Four to a hatch. Four to a hatch."

We count four to a hatch and drive the rest back. I find something dramatically crazy about this business of keeping people away from food which is in sight and I can imagine the mind and nerves twisting in the fingers of a strong impulse to do it again and to keep on doing it. There is one boy called Hoskins, a blond boy who keeps on winning the cricket-ball throw at the school sports. He is confident and strong-armed as a result of this practice. As Spence and I advance on this Hoskins to force him back to his table to wait his turn he shapes up angrily as if he is going to relieve his hunger and rage by treating us two as a pair of cricket balls and putting us through the roof, bidding Mr. Trigg and Teifion a swift good day in passing. Mr. Rawlins has his eye on Hoskins. He notes his truculence and seems delighted by it. He comes on Hoskins from the back and catches a handful of flesh from Hoskins' overlapping neck. Mr. Rawlins pulls hard at it and Hoskins' face goes blanker and flatter than usual.

"Out!" says Mr. Rawlins. "Here is precisely the type of goat we have been looking for. Put him right out. No dinner for this boy. Not the shadow of a morsel. A confirmed lout, this Hoskins. Put him out by the main door in sight of all the others so that this example can be rammed home."

We lead Hoskins to the main door and put him through it. He stands in the portal pulling at the skin under his chin so that it will fit his neck again. He also pats his collar and tie, which have been pulled inches out of plumb by Mr. Rawlins. There is no longer any anger in his face. He wears now only the expression of one whose life is rapidly filling up with mystery. We can hear the dark viscous glug-glug of the stuff as it edges its way up the sides of his tight, simple little being.

"Look, Spence," he says. "First, we pray. We pray for food. I was near Rawlins so I was one of the boys who prayed twice. We see no food. Then the hatches go up and we see food. We go for it. Some get driven back like dogs. They were the lucky ones as things turn out. You two get hold of me but that isn't all. You are only holding me in position for Rawlins who is capering about like a major bloody prophet. He starts pulling at the skin of my neck. He isn't satisfied with an inch or two and a quiet tug. Oh no. He draws up so much of me I wonder what part of me he is trying to get at. I've got very loose skin and after the first thirty seconds of pulling even the skin under my feet would have been coming north if I hadn't been standing on it and pressing hard. It might have been dark down at the old dining-hall but at least it was safe there."

Hoskins walks away to look for a chip-bar. When we get back inside we find that Mr. Rawlins has abandoned his four-to-a-hatch plan. He looks pleased now if he can keep it down to forty. The air around him is thick with trial and error. The boys are being served rapidly. The dark brown rubbery floor covering is becoming slippery under the heavy traffic of wet boots. The boys seem to be spilling more gravy here than they did before. A few tread awkwardly and go crashing to the floor between the tables grasping at the tables and eating steadily even as they fall. Mr. Rawlins seems less concerned. He even smiles at some of the boys who jostle and tip things. It is as if he has at times to whistle on his despair and call it back into the kennel before it barks all the beauty and pattern from life.

We sit down at our own table and begin to eat. Mrs. Willis is

leaning over one of the hatches and is watching us attentively as if expecting something rare to happen. As soon as we start sampling the various items we know what lies behind the close interest of Mrs. Willis. The potatoes are hard, the cabbage tough, the meat patchy. Little seems to have been done to make them feel any differently between the teeth than they would have done if we had got down to them and started to chew in the very field where the things grow and graze. Mr. Rawlins, sitting at the staff table, next to ours, eager to preserve his brief mood of serenity and well-being, smiles at us but there is no real heart in his smile. He is nodding with friendly tolerance at the devil but he knows this is only a breather between rounds. Mrs. Willis shrugs her shoulders and shouts over to us that she will soon get into the way of it. Tomorrow, she says, she will throw every switch and twist every wheel with daring and abandon. Something will be done then and she leaves us free to guess what. We wave back at her appreciatively. It takes a lot of arranging to keep heat and vegetables as carefully separated as they have been in the kitchen this morning and we are looking forward to some of the products that Mrs. Willis will be sending us through the hatches. Thrown at short notice into a kitchen of such size it must look like a steppe to her after the stone coffin of a place she has been used to working in for years, harassed on the flanks by the antics of such electrophobes as Alice Maude who has been sitting in the corner most of the morning, stricken, with dread biting holes through her apron and dreaming of moth-balls, and such agents of left-handedness as Jessie May who tomorrow no doubt will be giving the cabbage a thorough course of boiling in the knife cleaner, Mrs. Willis has a striped future. Mr. Rawlins calls Wilf over to him and tells him to go around the tables and inform the boys that if they find anything odd about the vegetables to bear in mind that they have been cooked in a new thoughtful way, a way that keeps the maximum goodness as compared with the old way which was soggy, tasteless and wasteful. Now for the first time we are having Nature's healing juices, the real goodness. Wilf sees that Mr. Rawlins is still bemused and remote in his manner and

comes to ask us whether it is necessary that he should pass this message on. We tell him that if he wants to join the vegetables in being done in a new and thoughtful way he could find no quicker road than to go around the boys as they sit there at present, their minds and mouths wrapped puzzled around this strange, upsetting rawness, and talk to them about goodness and nature's healing juices.

The pudding is a lot better. Mrs. Willis says that Alice Maude in the course of her lurchings sat by error on the right set of buttons or switches. There is a hell of pushing and confusion at the hatches as boys who have not eaten a mouthful of the first course crowd in to get double helpings of the second. Mr. Rawlins sits inert and unconcerned at his table. His last nerve seems to have just entered the bin for its spell of everlasting numbness. But for all the tragic calm of his attitude we all have the feeling that the vigorous oddity of this session has not yet been fully rounded, that life is still stumbling eyelessly around in its closet wondering which of its richer climaxes it is going to reach down from the peg.

"All we need to finish this off now," says Spence, "is some really decisive action from Trigg up there."

Even as he says this, we hear Trigg bawl to his assistant to be careful because they have now reached the spot where the catwalks end. We listen and watch. In our ears there is something prophetic in what Spence has said. We see a bulge in the asbestos boarding and hear a whimper from the boy Teifion who says it is getting very black in his part of the attic. We still feel a flock of things calling to each other across the stream of unrelated tomfooleries making a rendezvous at the rock of some dark revelation. Mr. Rawlins' fingers are rubbing at the chromium napkin holder which is his own personal property and which he loves to see glitter.

Then there is an immense cracking sound. Mrs. Willis' face with the pallid face of Alice Maude streaking up behind her appears at the hatch. Judging by her expression Mrs. Willis thinks that this might be a mass explosion of all the new gadgets and is surprised to find herself stopping short at the hatch with all this impulsive force seeking a hold at her rear.

Alice Maud^e is making a whole concert of noises, most of them low and crazed. We know right away what this new sound is. The whole sheet of asbestos above Mr. Rawlins' head falls away and Mr. Trigg comes dropping down in the most formal and stately way.

It is clear that for minutes past Mr. Trigg must have been tensing himself and even doing a bit of rehearsing for some such movement as this. Lots of boys are waving their arms and shouting as if this is the cherry on the trifle, the final indemnification for the first course that they have been expecting for minutes past. Mr. Trigg lands neatly on the table about two feet in front of Mr. Rawlins. The table collapses. This, too, we feel, was thought of, checked and made smoothly inevitable in the creative stables of suggestion. Mr. Trigg is not hurt, merely stupefied. He and Mr. Rawlins sit staring at each other for a few seconds like a pair of mating snakes. Trigg's cap has fallen off. It is a huge, check-patterned article. He picks it up, puts it carefully on Mr. Rawlins' head and then pats his own head to get the cap down flat. Then Mr. Trigg rises from the wreck of table and food and goes home looking glassier than a tumbler.

Mr. Rawlins does not move for a whole minute. He scrapes the splashes of dinner from his trousers and plucks at the hood of shocked dismay which has come down over his mind. His eyes have met the eyes of the pale, big boy Teifion who is peeping over the lip of the hole for some sight of Trigg. Mr. Rawlins is lying on the final slope of his lonely promontory. Beyond him now are only the black waters of a desperate nothingness.

"That was a bit of all right, that was," says the boy Teifion and to hit at his tickling nervousness he goes off into a high belt of laughter that echoes crazily about in the roof space. Those of us who can see nothing of Teifion from where we stand or sit and to whom this laughter comes as a surprise, run quickly to shelter. Mr. Rawlins waves his hand to us. We clear the hall. We can see that Mr. Rawlins wants no kind of truck with us either. We are the last to leave. As we stand in the doorway he is still there, sitting at the collapsed table, his head thrust

slightly forward as if under the weight of Mr. Trigg's cap. All in all he has never looked more like a chosen and anointed offspring of the force that arranges the neat seat of mankind's breeches in perfect readiness for marriage with the swinging toe-cap of disaster's patient pendulum. We feel near to Mr. Rawlins as he sits there. He is far along the road of full feeling, taking in his own person the whole flavour of a pain of which we, the following mass, will know only in diluted memory. Wilf, tender and slight in his structure as the boy Teifion, begins to laugh, with the simple recoil of pushed, strained nerves.

"Did you see Trigg?" he says between peals. "Did you see Trigg coming down like that? Dropping as cool as a cucumber like that. Like fruit from the roof. Part of what autumn is Trigg?"

"Oh, my God," says Spence.

My eyes catch one of the paintings on the wall opposite. It is a piece of loveliness, whose greens and browns are a catalogue of all the vibrations of the artist's love, a place of quiet and certainty. The central area of the new dining-hall becomes brilliantly clear and detailed. The shadow in the corner, where Mr. Rawlins sits, grows deeper.

We become conscious of a running wave of noise from the larking mob of kids on the field. A dozen games are going on, football, bomberino, which is a good cure for whole necks, catching, leap-frog and a lot of just plain running by groups of vacant-faced elements who seem to believe in movement without motive and we cannot say we blame them. We turn our faces towards this racket. It is simple. It is good. Mr. Rawlins is not simple. He is earnestly intent, facing up to life as if it were a bull to be tamed and made pacifically useful. And he is sitting in there with Mr. Trigg's cap on, with bits of dinner on his trouser-legs, on a level with the floor, in full defeat and strengthening shadow. When he gets used to the cap and finds that it keeps his scalp a little cosier and blither, the cloud will lift from the half-stunned Trigg and he will come marching back for his cap. We know. Mynydd Coch makes us sensitive as boils about these things. We walk towards the noise. We

look for some flank of it where we can slip in and contribute our own bit of clamour and show our strong teeth to the shadow that is hunching its shoulders over the form of Mr. Rawlins as he sits there in the dining-hall in his mood of mourning and recession.

CHAPTER V

IN THE afternoon Mynydd Coch gets busier than we have seen it for a long time. Not since part of the river wall went home to its fathers and four streets got the floods have we seen a more profound to-do and bustle. For the last month, the two local papers have been carrying some heavy advertisements about this civic parade and campaign for more intense saving and war-preparedness. There is no doubt that many of the voters have read these announcements, convinced themselves that Mynydd has really put aside its pre-war shroud and sent the urge to march and save jangling through the local veins as thickly as blood. They took a lot of convincing because times in Mynydd Coch before the war were so hard you could see crowds of natives sitting about the town square groaning as they tried to pass them and bumping into each other and becoming bitter as their search for any work that brought in anything fatter than verbal thanks got circular and vicious. But it is different now, and better days have created more joyous and more impressionable minds. Elements who did no work for ten or fifteen years and who used to denounce anyone who spoke of steady work as a spinner of lies and myths, are now earning considerable sums in various sections of the new prosperity. People who, in anguish at a world which kept promising them a ripeness that never came, encased their despair in a steady disbelief about everything in general and became ironically distrustful even about such well-known things as rain and night and the pat little facts we dug out from our school history, are now taking aboard, under the impulse of the great thaw, the most astonishing and incredible items about the skill of generals and the dreams of statesmen. Often you see these people standing at street corners holding up a few surplus pound notes in their hands, rocking with shock and even laughing at top pitch at this sight, and in many other

ways going demented as they grow to realise that they actually have something left over from basic expenses such as need to be put aside right away to ensure being fed and buried, to put in the stocking. We have seen them holding their heads on one side for hours on end to let the overflowing incredulity slop off.

There is a big streamer running across the town square saying "Don't be a Slave, Save". This is widely regarded as a clever slogan and we have not noticed the Town Clerk who made it up going out of his way to deny this and revile its style. He is strongly in his own favour, the Clerk. The slogan admits of two meanings. We have heard them being explained at plenty of length by boys who spent the years of slump in Adult Education classes and who now spend their evening hours in the town square analysing and classifying anything that comes along. Either your savings serve to halt these aggressors who might be angling to enslave us or you can use your savings to hold your trousers up when the next slump comes along taking up a collection of Mynydd Coch's braces.

The parade is marshalled in a stretch of road between the old war memorial and the Library and Institute. This is a quiet area and we have heard several of the organisers say that if there is to be confusion as the voters are pulled into their rightful positions it is better that it should happen here where it can be muffled. There is hardly anyone on the pavements watching except very old people and kids, and these groups are too busy getting on each other's every nerve to pay much heed to the parade. We are all arranged according to the organisations to which we belong.

They have carried this scheme to great lengths. Take me and Spence. We do not belong to any of these bodies like Cadets that normally do most of the marching and trumpeting which will be a feature of this day's work. We have always sought quieter and subtler alleys of life. So the only thing we belong to is the Play-Reading Group which meets every Thursday at the Library and Institute. We are a very mixed group, we play-readers, and we wait for the start of the parade looking huddled and forlorn and stared at with contempt even by such low-degree humans as a platoon of lads who have

not yet reached the age for joining the Cubs but have hoisted the yellow handkerchief today in anticipation of full membership. They have given us a banner in full prominence to lessen our appearance of being a protest movement. I am grasping one of the poles of this banner and the other pole is in the hands of Odo Montgomery, who always takes cowards' parts in our reading. Odo is a very good reciter and self-conscious to the verge of lunacy. He is straightening out the banner and has now got its emblem in sight. 'Lend To Defend The Right To Read Plays! Mynydd Coch Play-Reading Group.' Odo perks up on reading this. It gives him an encouraging sense of identity and he wishes to make as good an impression as he can. His jaw has grown as square as it ever will as he holds the banner pole aloft, using the very gesture that has won him countless prizes and eisteddfod awards at the beginning of his favourite piece, 'In the Midday Glare at Omdurman'. I notice that the people have dropped back and formed a clear space around Odo. The elements have taken a long look at the fanatical expression on Odo's face and think that he is about to take a swing at them with the pole to pay them back for the withering looks we have been having from all the other bodies. We see Wilf, tall and sombre, dressed as a First Aid man and fingering his water canteen every time he sees anyone who strikes him as being capable of fainting, and that takes in a good belt of voters in Mynydd. I see my own father in the full-time Fire-Watchers' Section. All these watchers are wearing rows of last-war medals and seem grim and intense as if struggling to gain and keep some sort of place in the sun. They know there is a lot of banter in the town about their doing nothing but sitting down wearing their backsides away and urging the enemy to keep it up because they are on to a good thing. Some of them have even been charged with the quiet piecemeal removal of the places they have been hired to watch, a removal so efficient that they have left nothing at their place of work sufficiently worth watching to merit their stirring from home. This sort of talk has rankled the firewatchers, especially people like my father who has been so bent on doing good in a social medium that

makes such an aim whimsical and even daring that he has never been able to mobilise his wits for the job of doing anything profitably dishonest. He is all for the triumph of democracy and has made himself a nuisance in Mynydd Coch with his constant sniffing and wishing to tear up floor-boards in the fear of smouldering fires. These watchers are also sensitive about having no uniform and as they stand about being marshalled they stare hard ahead of them in a rather dry and insane way to try and show people that there is more in this watching than meets the eye. There is a little squabble in progress between my father's outfit and the National Fire Service's turn-out. There is bitter rivalry between these two bodies which has not been helped by several war-time fires in Mynydd Coch that have more than kept up the old peacetime standard rescues with voters appearing suddenly at windows and diving into the sheet. The Fire Service has openly charged my father and his comrades with making sure that they have fires to watch. In less acrid moments they become almost theological in trying to determine who is the more significant agent, he who uses a hose, he who detects the need for a hose or he who supplies the need.

We see the fathers of Spence and Ted Dolan among the Air Raid Wardens. Spence's father is chatting with Ambrose Paul who has carved several niches in the life of Mynydd Coch. In the early days of the war it was Ambrose who caused a crisis of bickering and tension in the relations between the public and the wardens. Before the war Ambrose had been a pacifist and a sufferer from eye-trouble. Came the conflict and Ambrose, between the emotional shock of seeing his ideals being scooped up by the ashman and the muscles of his eyes twisted even more awry by dejection, kept seeing streaks of light in front of him in the darkness, and as he warmed to his work of defence, having a whistle and a monstrous flashlamp with which to jack up his confidence, he began taking these streaks to be uncurtained windows, and there were few voters who were not at some time or other threatened with gaol by Ambrose. There would have been a sharp reaction to this in the form of people stripping their windows of their layers of blackness and kindling

bonfires about the streets to show their hatred for this new mania of restriction that was besetting humanity if the wardens had not taken Ambrose in hand and given him a job in the headquarters building, counting the bombs that might fall and from then on he sat in a sort of nest just beneath the air raid siren being gradually deafened and keeping the fingers of his left hand outstretched and ready for a quick count when the explosive began to drop. These wardens are also among those who have come in for a lot of unreasoned criticism from elements whose jobs happen to keep them on the move and who think for that reason that they are the vital hub of all contemporary violence. It strikes us that war is largely a competition in self-importance on the part of people whose lives have been shrunk, sickened or deflated by the steady rub of uncreative ordinariness in conditions where death is kept in its normal, natural place. The wardens are wearing their uniforms. We do not know if these men have small heads or large berets but these articles hang down like stage curtains. Spence's father says the berets are so big that Mynydd Coch must have intercepted a boxful of Mahometan cosies meant for the sacrificial masking of mosques during periods of bewilderment on the part of honest muezzins at the sight of the international mix-up. When the berets were given out a pre-war copy of the wearer's Sunday paper was distributed to each one to be wrapped around the skull with a view to keeping the beret a lot nearer the head than the Government seemed to have intended, and to provide the warden with some light reading during the longer watches. Whether by accident or to find shelter from their critics many of the wardens are now wearing the slack in front like a mask and advance by touch and guesswork. This is not true of Ted's father. Going on expression only he should rightly be with my father's platoon. As a Looker he owes it to his faith to keep the beret tilted well back from the eyes and he himself is tilted well back to provide some foundation for the beret. His ears are visibly cocked in expectation of thunderbolt, flood or earthquake. He seems to be murmuring the first Sura of the Lookers. "At any moment This may end, So don't give up your Looking, friend." We see

Ted Dolan himself walking about wearing an Air Cadet's uniform. He is carrying his trumpet with a flourish and looks bold and full of gonads and an urge to wrong-do.

"I feel ripe for anything," he tells us, as the marshals come milling around to sort us out.

"You look it," says Spence.

"Haven't you boys got any uniform at all?" Ted seems genuinely sorry as he asks this and runs his handkerchief over his brass buttons and the mouth of his trumpet.

"Why should a man dress up in something special just to read plays?"

"Is that what you do?"

"It's on the banner. Can't you read?" We straighten the banner once more so that Ted can get to grips with the big simple letters.

He stands back and moves his lips as he reads. He nods his head as if this is the most remarkable thing he has ever seen, including his old man.

"And Odo Montgomery too? Is he in with you?"

"Odo is one of our best readers." We are now getting touchy about this wonder which is being provoked by the sight of us. We are sorry now we didn't carry on with our original plan of turning out in white sheets and dark complexions and a banner introducing us as members of the Indonesian Independence Party and asking if there are any people interested in doing a bit of saving to prevent our being enslaved. This would have needed a few footnotes to be made intelligible to some of the local voters but Spence sometimes does odd jobs for Morlais Meighan the draper, and he might have been able to get an extra hem for the banner on political grounds.

"Oh," says Ted, seeing that any more chaff from him and he will be getting a taste of the pole. "Couldn't they have given you a book each to hold or a couple of wigs to show you are actors or something. . . . You look sort of bare and pitiful to me."

"Go to hell, Ted."

There is no annoyance in Ted's face when he hears that. His mind seems to have branched off on to another track and

he is now looking delighted with a seam of cunning. We find it hard to follow Ted.

"You just watch me," he says.

"What now?"

"See my old man? I'm going to have some fun with him."

"How?" We think that having fun with such a taut element as a Looker is a rough task at the best of times but to squeeze a laugh from trafficking with a Looker dressed up for Air Raids which are certainly a fair instalment on the last trump and a legitimate bit of homework and practice for such an element strikes us as foolhardy.

"Watch me," says Ted, "I'm going to frighten hell out of him."

"That's good," says Spence. "Make a full job of it, Ted. Frighten so much hell out of him his eldest son Ted will be born again, this time with a bad stammer and no crises calling for trumpeters."

Ted starts creeping along, crouched and looking more cunning with every step. He has his trumpet extended before him and every once in a while he keeps looking back at us and chuckling and grinning. People watching him pass, and having no idea of the true context of his antics, think he is some kind of uniformed loon or imported entertainer and they offer him pity, advice or coppers as he goes past. Ted takes all three, having a kind of cat-like balance and fitness in all circumstances. Wilfie catches sight of Ted as he is advancing in this crouching and disquieting way and follows at a wise distance. He has never considered Ted to be anywhere in the mental running and now thinks that the great multitude and the excitement have finally driven him totally off the hinge. He hoists his water canteen to the ready and looks up rabies in the index of his St. John's Handbook.

Ted comes to a stop at his father's elbow. Mr. Dolan's eyes are fixed squarely and defiantly on the skyline, poised far above the transient ruck of marchers with their brief sickroom policies around about. Ted puts the trumpet to his lips, its mouth grazing his father's ear. Ted winks at the other wardens. The latter know him to be Mr. Dolan's son and put

this activity down as some new phase in the development of the Dolans as Lookers. Ted lets fly with a note that seems to move the very buildings back a yard. The boy certainly has blast. Charlemagne turns back once more for Roncesvalles; the surrounding wardens' berets do a complete turn about. Mr. Dolan hurls his into the air, his face quivering and transformed and even as the beret is still spinning he yells:

"The End! Hallelujah!"

"Somebody's fainted!" shouts a voice.

"Who is it?"

"The First Aid man."

We rush up. As we dose the fallen Wilfie from his own water canteen and fan him with the banner we see Mr. Dolan chasing Ted up the road. Spence's father has left his contingent and is staring down at Wilfie, pensively and with sadder eye than usual.

"Even after we have calmed and lulled the fratricidal passions of East and West," he says as if he is reading it out, "even after we have put paid to hatred and socialised the planets, we'll still have them bloody Dolans."

The parade gets under way. Just ahead of us there is a small body of Old Contemptibles showing plenty of ribbon and contempt for the newer formations that file past them to take their place at the head of the procession. In front of them is a tiny group of Boer War veterans looking cold, toothless and bemused, puzzled to know, seemingly, the whys and hows of the injustice which made wars bigger and more socially significant as they themselves grew weaker and more obscure. The people on the pavements are interested in this pageant of veterans. This is probably the first time they have witnessed in so neat and assimilable a form the essential continuity of bloodiness in men's relations. The lesson could be made even more striking if they could bring forth that very aged man from Presbyterian Road who is supposed to have fought in the early campaigns of Owen Glyndwr but drew out on an immature pension on learning from Merlin the Wizard that Glyndwr was a sheer opportunist. The man now leaves the house only on New Year's Day to collect the shiny pennies which are given out to

children to celebrate this feast, showing that after a too long period of trying to keep his loyalties straight, fresh and free from flies, he has become young in his ways. But even if his trips outdoors were more frequent he may not see much charm in a demonstration staged to promote a thing so bovinely sedate as wars in which the Celts are no more than a conforming minority.

Several knots of people along the route, belonging to the lower level of thinkers in Mynydd Coch and made graceless by hours of waiting on unenchanted flagstones, look without favour on the ununiformed simplicity of our turn-out as play-readers, and give us a small hoot. Odo blushes up and shouts to me that he cannot stand the humiliation of it and tells me that he is going to nip off home and put on a brass helmet which once belonged to his father in the days of the town's first fire brigade. This helmet, says Odo to us all in a nervous and trembling gabble, is a huge and gleaming affair, the size of an average brazier and worn by him with the proper air would put our entire group into a better light. We do not think much of this idea of having our whole dignified little company overshadowed and Odo himself bent double beneath this canopy of brass. I tell Odo not to be foolish and the hooting goes on, the mindless fringe along the pavements being delighted to have a target for their urge to dissent which is kept sadly bottled by the morbid unanimity of wartime. Odo even starts reciting 'In the Midday Glare of Omdurman' and the people hoot a little more thinking that Odo is now becoming reckless and making speeches of formal objection to the parade and to war in general. In his rage and excitement he gets the banner twisted and the crowd, unable to spell out our identity from the large letters, know less about us than they did before. Some take us to be prisoners of war. Since we all have dark hair with the exception of Andrew Pearce who is a Saint-Simonite and has brooded himself into a state of great greyness, we are put down as Italians specially dressed up for this parade to keep up the new standard of neatness which Mynydd Coch has established to compensate itself for the drab years when a frock-coat would have been interpreted as a coat cut down from a grandmother's old dress.

"You-a no like-a da Mynydd-a Coch," shouts one sturdy wit.

"You are-a blood-a well right," says Spence.

Odo looks startled at Spence and goes "Sh . . . sh!" He says they will only turn nasty if you answer them back, sounding for all the world as if we are making our way through a jungle and these elements on the pavements are some kind of lurking animal. They probably are; they have an appearance of delighted ferocity. We decide there is something wrong with Odo. He is a man approaching thirty. He does an intricate job of counting in the Finance Department of the Council Chamber and has become greatly beloved in the town, since the Income Tax scoop came plunging down into the depths of the lower prolies, by advising people on how to fill up appeals and blind the Inland Revenue with guile and even downright duplicity. We wish Odo could have the same cynical outlook on these spectators at the parade as he has towards the tax-collectors. He is also grade 3 and has been rejected so decisively from military service you could hear the bang of it right around the county. He has a lot of weakness in the body; the only strong thing about him is bone and he claims that at certain phases of the full moon even that gives up the marrow and starts flopping about like a kite in the wind. But in spite of all this we have never seen anyone reduced to such terror at being out of tune with the flatly vulgar tone of his times, at the prospect of what people will say when they see him in civilian clothes. The mania to conform has butchered Odo through and through. What Odo feels about walking down a street in civilian clothes is not unlike what most people would feel about walking down that same street in no clothes at all. He has itched always for some cosy womb of inconspicuous sameness and he curses himself and nature for having been made in a cracked mould, scooped out of the comforting multitude and dumped down on the margin, visible and prickly. They would not even let Odo into the Home Guard. The Town Surveyor is one of the head men in that body and he shoves all the accounts involved in its administration on to the nimble and eager brain of Odo. But when Odo asked for a uniform as part

of Mynydd's gratitude for all this figuring, even a coat with no trousers or an arm-band with a crest showing a well-struck balance, the Surveyor looked hard at Odo, seemed indeed to be doing his very best kind of surveying, liquefied Odo into a fast-evaporating pool of nervous terror and then said that he owed it to a fine body of men to exclude from their ranks such overtly feeble types as Odo. A good figurer, but no warrior. He concluded by way of an official joke that he might call on Odo if some method were found of counting our national enemies out of existence.

I get tired of Odo's neuropathic twitching and lurching. I shout across to him to keep the banner steady and to stop worrying. But this is of no avail. The laughter grows louder. Odo tries now to hide his face behind the banner and he loses his sense of direction as well as his self-respect and the whole play-reading group is soon heading for the pavement. Spence gets behind Odo and steers him back into plumb. Then I find that most of this laughter from the spectators is not meant for us at all. Immediately behind is a contingent of old men who look at first sight as if they are there on behalf of the boys who made that famous last stand against Agrippa. They too have a banner. The Surveyor has without question done a good job with these banners. He has ransacked every chapel vestry in Mynydd Coch for material and poles with which to enrich the pageantry of this turn-out. He has got hold of more banners than there are bodies and causes in Mynydd Coch needing to be heralded. These old men are announced as "The Diggers. Mynydd Coch Horticultural Union." Their president, looking very dug-up and older even than that Winstanley who organised a group called the Diggers three hundred years ago, walks in front of them holding up the greatest cabbage we have ever seen. He has a small boy immediately in front of him serving as a kind of prop for the cabbage when it starts to sag downward from his grasp. It covers the whole top part of the Digger's body and if he had a helmet, a grin and evil intentions he would look exactly like one of those jungle-fighters we see advancing weekly in the cinema holding whole trees in front of them and deceiving us on all fronts. And all the other

diggers hold a vegetable too. There is a sample of every known type of vegetable grown in Mynydd, including potatoes grown, since the war started, on the loftiest hillsides with their eyes popping out from dizziness with height and there is a long fine variety of the Wishful Dishful, a kind of bean which grows from brains that have long ceased to think under the weight of wondering what the hell thought has ever brought them anyway. These Diggers look comical or obscene depending on their size and shape and those of the produce they carry. The voters on the pavement do most of their laughing at a fat member of the troupe who is dandling a gigantic carrot scrubbed to an arrogant crimson which he waggles with the bashless ease of a Greek comedian. This caper will probably arouse laughter until the end of time, in Mynydd Coch at least where the long dominion of a dark religious mood has given a roaring life to the least articulate symbol, or until such time as these things are done by disinfected thought but even then there will no doubt be performers who will have ways of just thinking that will be nearer the knuckle of idiot and ridiculous simplicity than most.

The man with the carrot does no good for Odo. Odo knows nothing of the squad of produce-bearing diggers in our rear and while the laughter gets up into the howling stage as the carrot-digger becomes more and more allusive in his antics and the crowd gets in all ways denser as we approach the town's centre, Odo's mental state moves swiftly to the crisis. We enter the short street that will lead us into the town square. Suddenly the banner is nearly wrenched from my grasp. Only a sharp swerve prevents the pole being lodged in my navel. This is due to Odo. He is now walking with the most prodigious limp. His left knee-cap is grazing the ground as if he is bowing to something every other second.

"Steady there," I shout. "Take it easy, Odo. You're playing the bear with the banner."

Then I see what Odo is getting at. He is trying to give the impression that he has been wounded. I am right.

"I got it there, on the beach at Dunkirk," cries Odo in a high voice.

I look at Spence, wondering.

"He means Wai-kiki," says Spence and I nod, remembering that Odo once did a little singing with Teilo Higgins and his Hawaii Four down at the Church Hall.

Odo has now ceased to limp. He looks shaken, ashamed. The worst of his panic has passed. He is climbing with bloody palms back to the steppe of tolerated horror where he does the most of his living and accounting.

"You mean the Dunkirk evacuation, Odo?" I ask. "When were you ever on that beach, boyo?"

Odo looks at me guiltily, cold after the hot-winged passing of his great myth.

"1937," he says. "On a trip got up by the Rechabites."

We are pleased that Odo says the truth in this way. We would be sorry to see all his homely virtues in full decay as they catch the infected whiff of our abounding crises. But he has no alternative to virtue. Odo has been damned by years of training to be an asset to humanity. Besides being a skilled worker in the finance department and a wreck with regard to nerves, a man who has remissly bitten off his own claws and finds himself unfitted both for attack and defence, with soft pads and unavailing fur, he is also a teacher at the Tabor Tabernacle, a renowned refuge for the truthful, and he has renounced lying as a regular tactic.

We are now filing into the main square. Just outside the door of the Council Chamber there is a fairly lofty dais covered over with some new red plush material of the sort that dignitaries seem to love as promoting an air of pomp and enlivening their own sense of mission. As we enter the square there is a fair amount of clapping. This is not for us but for the plush which is so new and so crimson it must be driving people from the more sombre homes half-mad with excitement. On the platform is the whole council standing in a semi-circle at the back like a chorus in a musical comedy, but not as merry and doing no singing, and in front of them are some high military officers looking as draped and splendid as the platform itself. These officers will take the salute and we will take anything else that is left over and worth the taking. Besides the officers

there is the council's chairman, Mr. Harry Carewis, who is the nearest we come to having a mayor. Mr. Carewis owns a net of grocery stores in the area and has the local name for being a wizard in the field of making money and distributing food. We have heard this so often we have sometimes felt that hunger would never have figured in human affairs if Mr. Carewis had not set up his food shops to prompt the urge to eat. He has been busy since the war started buying up any small businesses in the district that have had to close as a result of the emergency, also a few farms, and he has put on so much social and financial weight at a time normally associated with want and misery it will not surprise us at all if fifty years from now, thumbing through the archives of this time as matured research workers, we find that Mr. Carewis took a leading and seminal role in preparing and unleashing this commotion. If he were not so old we could imagine him moving swiftly from one part of Europe to another, putting false moustaches off and on to fool the police and the electorate, propounding racial theories, demanding war, playing hell and insisting that all other grocers be called up. However that may be, the man has grown greatly since the pig-sticking season began. Death may cure Mr. Carewis of habits like these but now we are doubtful even about that. Death seems so harmless up against some of the people who hold the forefront of our stage we cannot really imagine it stopping their water.

Mr. Carewis is wearing a kind of mayoral chain although he is not in the strict sense a mayor. This annoys Mr. Carewis and he says that if Mynydd Coch can attract a few more factories it will be made a borough. Then we will not be able to see him for robe and ornamental metal. We have never before seen such a chain as he is wearing now. It has none of the medallions that are so often to be seen in mayors' chains. This article has a heavy, sullen, unlovely, utility look, like the ones you see in the grosser types of toilet and if you look carefully enough at the man and ponder deeply enough about his character and place in the universe you begin to wonder whether you are sitting or standing. He does not seem too steady on his feet. This may be due to wealth which would make anyone giddy in a place like

Mynydd or it may be due to age, or conscience or just the natural downward sag of the chain. We notice that various members of the council give him a quiet tug at moments when Mr. Carewis seems headed on to his face or off the platform. At Mr. Carewis' left is the Clerk to the Council, laden with papers and insight into local affairs. Looking at this official we cannot help thinking that no man can look as keenly and busily shrewd as he and still leave the earth as contentedly innocent as when he found it. His progressive awareness is bound to ulcerate soon or late. Next to him is Leo's father, tall, rotund and the nearest we could come in Mynydd to the genuine article if we were casting anyone for the part of Cæsar Augustus. If it were not for the thick stripes in his trousers he would have us shouting Ave and pulling the lions towards the Christians even now. He owns a big furniture shop in Mynydd and he has been sitting on the council for so long he has had the whole thing re-upholstered for his greater comfort. Some workmen are still poking about at the back of the platform driving in odd nails here and there at the dictate of various councillors who are jumping up and down and saying nervously that the structure has too much give for safety. An electrician is still wiring the microphone that hangs in front of Mr. Carewis. The latter, having reached intellectual fullness in the time and on the ideas of Malthus and Hannah More, does not seem to know what this microphone is for and waves his hand at it once in a while as if it were a wasp.

We have all squeezed into the town square now. The gardening contingent behind us march forward and drop their vegetables into a kind of large vat at the side of the platform. The carrot performer has a last comedic waggle before dropping in his produce but it is clear that his star value even among the tauter matrons has waned. There is no laughter, only a hard look from the councillors who are afraid that the high military officers might think they are squandering rates on the hire and upkeep of a municipal buffoon and an amazed belch from Mr. Carewis who thought that the carrot-man, with his obscene manoeuvre, was trying to attract his attention in a new way appropriate to the mood of carnival.

We understand that these vegetables are to be raffled later on. The money will go to provide the area covered with allotments with a new mesh wire fence because vegetable thieves keep on lacerating themselves on the barbs of the present fence, and the gardeners do not wish to seem too malicious in their pride of property by causing all these injuries to the outlaw fringe as they leap carelessly to freedom with their loot.

Now a troop of school children is marching towards the platform. They drop silver coins into the vat. Leo's father bends forward, smiling, and says a few words into the microphone. No one hears what he says; the instrument is still dead. Mr. Warburton's smile goes to rest at the back of his head and he gives an imperious frown at the electrician, as if saying how sorry he is now the electrician did not go on the same list as Cicero. He calls on one of his fellow councillors, a giant in blue serge, an official of one of the steel unions in Mynydd and the owner of a voice that can carry on a conversation with ease in competition with a steam hammer. The giant grins on hearing Mr. Warburton's request. He cups his hand around his mouth and announces in a roar that sends Mr. Carewis shuddering into the arms of the nearest officer, that the little act just witnessed around the vat symbolises the fruitful union of farming and finance. Andrew Pearce, the grey-haired primitive Socialist, mutters to us that an even better symbol of this interesting bout of economic fornication would be a vatful of Mynydd Coch's leading money bags who have been buying farms at ceiling prices during the war with a view to cashing in on a future full of famine and putting into an enduring and dignified form as much of their cash wealth as possible.

The school kids have not finished yet. Standing back from the vat they form fours and from their ranks steps a boy of about twelve. He catches the eye like a flash. He has plastered hair and is generally done up to toffee-apple standard. He bows to the council. Whoever put this little element through his paces has obviously given up a lot of evenings to the job. An ambassador to the Papal Court could hardly be smoother. Mynydd Coch has not seen such full-jointed bowing since we gave up worshipping Baal and went over to the truck-system.

"Oh, that Meirion is a rare treat," says a woman near us, a member of the British Legion, Women's Section, and probably Meirion's mother.

"Oh, that Meirion looks lovely," says another woman who sounds like Meirion's aunt or, if he really means the masher-like way he does his hair, his mistress.

We put Meirion high on our list of pains in the prostate and the pinafore, a promising preacher or Clerk to the Council.

"Lest we fall to the rank of slave," shouts Meirion.

"Save!" bawl the kids.

"Lest freedom be forced to the grave,"

"Save!"

"Lest we bend the neck to thug or knave,"

"Save!"

Meirion is putting a lot of action into his lines. After the very fine bowing he has done it is only natural that he puts plenty of bend into his neck at that last stanza.

"There are so many rhymes with 'save'," says Spence, "there's no reason why this should not go on until somebody kills Meirion or sets the dais on fire."

"It would never burn with those elements on board."

"That leaves us no choice but Meirion."

"Suits me. Between his hair and his rhymes he's bobbing up and down there like a bright bruise."

Leo's father is talking again. The microphone has not yet come to life and only a few of us can hear what he says. We see the boy Meirion back in the ranks combing his hair and looking as if the peak and point of the whole parade has now passed. We listen carefully to Leo's father who is straining to make the same sort of thunder as that gigantic Trade Union official.

"What kind of speech does old Harry Carewis make?"

"He's been known to reach five sentences with all verbs accounted for after having his brain tapped from the back sharply for thirty minutes."

But Mr. Carewis is not going to make a speech. Leo's father is saying that in view of the great feeling of patriotism that marks these parades for the promotion of saving, not to men-

tion the amazement which, as already pointed out, is felt in Mynydd Coch at having anything to save, Mr. Carewis is going to recite the greatest piece of patriotic writing in English.

"It'll be 'In the Midday Glare at Omdurman'," says Odo with delight, cupping his ear and shaping his lips to follow Mr. Carewis word for word. Odo does not seem to have covered any part of the great tract of English literature except this Omdurman item.

"He will give us," says Leo's father, "an extract from the deathless speech of that prince of certificate-holders, Henry the Fifth."

At this point a gaggle of people forms around Mr. Carewis to gear him up for the effort.

"Once more, once more . . ." comes a low prairie wind of prompting.

Mr. Carewis is swaying around a little and not a few are wondering whether to expect a speech or a jig. If Shakespeare himself were trying to remind Mr. Carewis of the first line, he would not find it any easier to get started. He seems very remote and muzzy. He is pushed against the microphone. His mouth is dead against it as if he is going to take a bite and carry on the tradition of simple, low-grade clowning which has been on stop since the man with the carrot dumped his pride and prop into the vat.

"Once more, once more . . ." he murmurs into the dead microphone.

Only a few of us near the dais have any idea of what he is about. One of the officers on the dais is staring at our play-reading banner as if play reading or even just reading is a heresy that is coming across his nostrils for the first time. He looks at us with a curious disgust. Andrew Pearce, Spence and I do him the same honour but with less curiosity. The electrician in the corner gives a triumphant smile and on the instant Mr. Carewis' voice booms around the square.

"Once more . . ." the boom startles him and he looks blankly at the microphone waiting for his nerves to get the curve out of their back and stop bristling. Not so the young

megalomaniac Meirion with the plastered hair and the noisy future. He thinks these booming words are a command for him and leaps out of the ranks again, starting up with the old chant and chorus:

"Lest we fall to the rank of slave,"

"Save!" wail the kids, wearily, as if slavery had beaten saving to it by a head.

The microphone dies again and for half a minute we have Meirion and his well-dressed echoes bawling away on the ground level and practically the whole Council doing a very fine piece of verse-speaking up on the platform by way of prompting Mr. Harry Carewis. Chorally they are not up to the mark and they all seem to have picked a line each, and this does not help Mr. Carewis any more than it satisfies us. Meirion is eventually taken in hand and he vanishes from view with the two women near us still cooing their love and admiration. We think he may have joined the vegetables in the vat.

"Potentially, a broth of a boy that Meirion," says Andrew Pearce, giving tongue to our thought.

The recitation is wambling to a close on the dais. Henry the Fifth can never have been so flat on his back as he is at this moment, being parcelled out among those elders on the platform. The Clerk is urging Mr. Carewis forward.

"England for Harry. England for Harry!"

The microphone flips into tremendous life again.

"England for Harry!" Mr. Carewis has caught on with a will and his voice comes bounding back from the surrounding buildings like shrapnel.

"My God !" says Andrew Pearce to us. "He's bought up three-quarters of Mynydd Coch, he's bought so many farms even the cows are protesting, and now he's after the whole of England. Didn't I tell you that all war is a drive to monopoly?"

The next event is a bit of intensive marching around the dais by the band of the Air Cadets, with Ted Dolan in the front. We also see Benny Turner in the back row with a kettle-drum looking absorbed and a little disgusted at the flat-footed conception of rhythm he has to share with his brother-cadets. But he enters into the spirit of the day and from the

word go, given by the Clerk, he drums for dear life and for nothing else that we can see. Marching also is the Mynydd Coch Drum and Fife band, a much more mature organisation but with much less regimented notions of such things as tempo than the Cadets. The basis of recruitment and membership with the Drum and Fife is brittle. If you have a fife and happen to be walking in the same direction as two or three other boys with the same equipment and the day happens to call for a note of festival, you are in. It has always led a volcanic sort of life, blowing up into dark and sulphurous activity when you least expect it. Here they are today, determined to put in their quota around the dais and obviously annoying the leader of the Cadets' band who does not seem to have even heard of the Drum and Fife, let alone bargained on having them cheek by jowl with his own neat and highly trained performers. He is a correct, sand-papered looking element, this Cadet leader, with his eye constantly flicking towards the high military officers on the dais, and as he passes us to get the item launched we hear him refer to the Drum and Fife, who are having a bout of trouble forming fours and finding the right music, as bohemian riff-raff. The councillors who see the man who had been fiddling about with the carrot now fiddling about with a fife and obviously a key man in the company, agree with the Cadet leader. The bandsmen have not much room to manoeuvre in. The crowd is at the elbows of those on the outside and the inner column is pinned against the dais. In a few seconds they have completed the circuit and as they come around the corner each time they all look astonished to be once again precisely where they were when they were playing the last note. This must give rise to a bewildered feeling about the nature of time and space because some of them play the last note over again to be on the safe side, and this gives a marked quality of largo to the whole performance. The noise they make is deafening and there would be cries for peace from the crowd if it were not for such diversions as seeing Ambrose Legge, the bass drummer of the Drum and Fife who has not been out with the band since the carnivals of 1926, getting giddy from so much turning, losing

control and running sheer into the crowd and waving his sticks about in a sweating frenzy, since he is a claustrophobe and dazed by the racket and the mob around, and his blows land as often on the heads of the voters as on the pigskin. The boy Meirion, as adult as can be, tries to censure Ambrose for this wild lurching and Ambrose lets him have a whanger on the side of the head which sends Meirion to the floor and his two women disciples charging after Ambrose murder-bound. The people on the platform get a little giddy looking down on the platoon of drummers and trumpeters and fifers in apparently incessant movement around them. It must be, for them, like standing at the knob of a roulette table. Mr. Carewis, no brighter now than when he was showing us the breach, shows a tendency to start marching around the platform by a parallel route but he is held back. Matters are not improved when the Drum and Fife start falling back a few bars in their race with the younger and fitter lungs of the Cadets, and from their defeat arises the phoenix of a completely different tune. We hear the leader of the Drum and Fife telling his followers that it is now every man for himself and we see them making for their copies to have at least the satisfaction of playing their favourite piece in the resulting hell. At this point we of the play-reading group begin to wriggle away from the dais and homeward through the great inert mass of listeners and watchers. It is interesting as we elbow and wrestle our way to freedom to see the shorter members of the crowd who have long given up the effort to follow the course of the ceremony. They have been standing there for an hour and they have slipped past the stage of nightmare and have entered into full and pleasant stupor staring at the back of the people in front with petrified eyes and hanging mouth. It surprises us to see how much genuine but unofficial death there is at a gathering like this. Odo does not make the journey with us. He is afraid that we will make a bad impression by moving away before the end. We see him standing there by the dais, holding both banner poles tightly in his hand, grinning crazily up at the officials and officers on the dais and shaking his head and body to the sound of whatever music comes through from the battle of belches now going

on between the Cadets and the Drum and Fife, as if to show those around that without his regular dose of martial rhythm his life would be a grey and bitter thing.

“What the hell crawls and itches at the bottom of that poor Odo?”

“No idea, boy. No idea at all. He’s mysterious, that Odo.”

CHAPTER VI

SPENCER AND I approach the main gate of the school. It is twilight and our turn on the firewatching rota. We like this duty. It adds to our pocket money, for the County Council lets us have a few shillings each night we sit up preventing its premises from being burned down. Later, when we move from University into the mature soldiery, we will be grateful for the discipline of this mild, midnight desolation. And there is also something about this business of remaining awake for the larger part of the night that seems to fit the character of Mynydd Coch like a glove. It is a place that lives better by night than by day. There is something chasteningly grim about the place's outline seen in raw light which encourages a total silence. By day-time the sight of such items as scrofulous streets and the stare of men whose lungs get more and more like stone frighten thought and a wary astonishment is held up as a shield against any further instalments of such lines in reality. But at night the sense of speculative dismay that has been doing business in Mynydd Coch ever since they started tearing out the hillside and the valley bed for coal withdraws, and the minds of our neighbours come out of hiding and begin all over again from the premiss of an unspoiled life. The streets and slopes fill up with an assorted yet intelligible and pleasing music. People by the hundred, if it is not raining or cold, sit out on door-steps and window-sills, talking in raised voices one to the other, quick to laugh, eager to forget the fractious insufficiency on which for a moment they have turned their back. The more thoughtful simply gaze at the night sky and wish you as you pass, in voices as distant and inscrutable as the very stars they look upon, good dreams and a painless life. So this scheme of fire-watching was taken straight to the heart of Mynydd Coch. It has none of the efficient tautness it would have in places that believe in sleeping

through darkness as a necessary prelude to gainful labour on the morrow. Our group of watchers, Spencer, Wilfie, Georgie Bryant and myself, is a contented, balanced band. We have talked for long hours during our nights of duty, multiplying our depth of experience by four as we listen wide-eyed to each other's revelations.

We get all kinds of people walking into the school through the door that is left open for fire-watchers. Some are driven by the smallness of their own dwellings to walk up and down the long corridors and ponder on the chaste monastic echoes made along the high walls by their nailed boots. Others are simply curious to know what the inside of a school looks like, seeking some memory of early days or fresh material with which to denounce such places as a menace to the rates. Others come in because there is some train of thought about their souls, their jobs, their kids, or, branching out, their notions about the universe, which will not let them sleep and they come in to talk it over with us. We, unless we have on duty a master who thinks that the agonised curiosity of man is not one of the fires we are paid to watch, like to welcome these wanderers and offer them the solace of our listening pity.

We are plagued too by lovers. We have nothing against love unless it is actively pinning us to the wall and we would urge the Council to let these lovers have plenty of room for their hobby because it seems to cause nothing but trouble to the nerves of mankind to be forever barking displeasure on their flanks. Normally there are many open spaces in Mynydd Coch where these lovers can meet and have to do with the other. But in the third year of the war a preacher who is sharpening the moral conscience of this town to a lethal point, worried by such things as the stoppage of church bells and the irreverence of quite small youths smoking and swearing on their way to work in war factories, observed in his walks around the area that it was getting harder and harder to put your foot down in any spot away from the public eye without being thanked or sworn at by a human being. Six years from now, he will be equally touchy and responsive to juvenile delinquency on a broader front. He worked out a theory, based on a series of

figures and rough drawings collected on his trips up and down the most-frequented lanes and doorways, that the aim of all wars is not freedom but licence, that the real flags waved by nations at war are the garments of respectability which have been torn off in the course of this or that bit of shameless daring. He was supported in this by one of Mynydd's leading traders, a fanatical restrictionist in carnal matters who was suffering from a cold in the eye and splinters in the scalp as a result of crouching behind his shop door staring through the key-hole at the actions of couples encamped in his doorway. So, platoons of the proudly unsinful were organised to march about after nightfall flashing the light of a torch and a warning to all girls who were found canoodling with the military. The platoons were usually five or six in number and however angry the male lover became in his protests he rarely went further than that because he found something sinisterly absolute and unanswerable like a rock-face or an ocean in the blankly hostile stare of these censors. The platoons worked to a definite ritual. After the couple was discovered and their attention held by a cry and a torch flash the platoon leader gave a short reading from Paul. This was followed by an extract full of doom from a pamphlet on venereal infection which had fallen with a great clatter into the hands of the pure. This is why many of these lovers have come around to the side door of the school and made a request to the fire-watchers in attendance that they be allowed the use of some nook inside the school where they will not be flashed at, read to, hounded or made to stammer with shock at some of these facts that come out of the pamphlet.

Near the school gate Spencer and I notice a sailor and a girl. From the quick glance we give them we think they are tipsy. They are swaying and moaning and paying no heed at all to the fact that we are just a few yards away. We recognise the sailor. His name is Wally Leyshon and three years ago he was a pupil at this very school. We can tell from his conduct that Wally is certainly home from a long, lonely crossing and that he feels no shyness at making love in the precincts where he once made nothing but mental progress. We are interested and

would like to watch Wally out to the end but we force ourselves to pass. Then we hear a considerable volume of footsteps on the pavement outside the school gate. From the same direction as the steps comes the whining rhetoric that arises from an outraged moral sense, the buzzy lifting of a wasp from some piece of putrefaction that has grown too softly vile. Spencer and I pause, thinking that moonlight around Wally Leyshon within, and several sets of well-ground moral teeth without, will provide us with a few items for our album, several talking-points for the night's session and will give Wally the best-chewed bit of delinquent scalp since Adam. We recognise some of the voices. It is one of the platoons organised by the League for the Protection of Our Girls. The loudest voice is that of Mr. Tregethin, the very prophet and guide of the League, Mynydd Coch's outstanding scourge for the loose and recumbent, and he sounds tonight as if he has a rare length of whip for Wally. We can tell by his tone, provoked to a higher plane of prohibitive fury by the solvent touch of the moon, that he is in special vein, not to be fooled with or brooked, fit to sterilise the orb and to protect not only Our Girls but All Girls. We can see Wally Leyshon headed for a thicket of sanctions from which no number of increased knots per hour will serve to get him free. With the merciful part of our minds we pray that the platoon will pass on leaving the lovers unnoticed. But with the barbarian under-belly our minds, sensing crude sport in the coming conflict, wish God speed and an accurate beam to Mr. Tregethin's torch. Mr. Tregethin does not need our good wishes. His distrust is rigid, a magnetic mine as ever was for the coasting tramp of sin. He stops at the gate, sniffing.

"There, there!" says a woman's voice.

"Yes, yes," says Mr. Tregethin and sniffs some more. Then he opens up with his torch. It is without question the biggest torch we have ever seen. It is as if Mr. Tregethin has fitted his entire arm with limelight. We can believe the stories we have heard of caught sinners detected in a moment of unthinking heat in Mr. Tregethin's spotlight going about for days twitching and paralysed with fear. If Mr. Tregethin were

not so pleased with being Mr. Tregethin, it is possible that he would be rocketed into all kinds of delusion by this act of pressing the button of this monster torch and standing above the sex-urge of Mynydd just as if he were the crack of dawn itself, reading out the banns for its union with that other well-known crack, doom.

"Shame, shame," cry the platoon in voices of great anger that are framed in a thin wire of rapt interest.

"Come out of there," says Mr. Tregethin.

"You go to the devil," says Wally and we hope that Wally will now go on to tell Mr. Tregethin that in the course of his work as a gunner with the convoys he did not find the Germans even with their submarines and air fleets ever made such a fuss of him as Mr. Tregethin is doing now. Wally's voice is harsh and thick with love and drink. He is at least a mile away from the nearest piquant retort. He thinks that sentence ends the matter, and he continues to go about his business of passion refreshed by the short pause. We are sorrier than ever that we did not find some way of warning this Wally to come along to the school yard equipped with a prepared script. Everything he is doing or saying now is only bringing him more and more directly under Mr. Tregethin's flail. Wally has no idea of the true quality of his prosecutors. These men and women in the platoon really think there is a spirit of evil and in their singrieved, moonstruck eyes at this moment, the spirit looks very much like Wally. On top of this, one of the women who seems to be short-sighted and is peering, her head as near Wally as his uniform, thinks that Wally's friend is her daughter, and she shrieks to show her amazement at this turn of events. "Lucy, for shame, for shame," she shouts and there are quick murmurs of assent and sympathy from her companions. We can see Mr. Tregethin draw himself up to his full five feet five and give Wally the same kind of stare as we have seen in pictures of Aztec priests opening the package when their altar knives come back from the grinders. Wally's girl, thinking this as good a time as any to come back to life, pushes away the peering woman.

"I'm Mona Perkins. My name is Mona."

"This isn't Lucy," says Wally, confusedly, his mind not helped by this mixing of names. "Who's Lucy? Where's Lucy?"

"Drive them out," cries one of the men behind Mr. Tregethin. This man is wearing an eye-shade so he must be the trader who learned so much of life through the key-hole of his shop at a small termly fee of one chill in the eye. What we can see of his face around the shade is jerking with dismay, with a flavouring of what may well be envy. He is saying: "In a school, too, in a school, too!" for all the world as if Wally has his girl friend Mona stretched out on a blackboard.

Mr. Tregethin has now commenced his reading. It is taken from the Old Testament and relates some remarkable bit of vengeance dropped on a set of antics not unlike those of Wally, dropped with timely and blasting precision. Mr. Tregethin's voice is deep and passionate and urgent. He has a fine voice and he is enjoying the reading, so he is really worth listening to there in the rich moonlight. He sounds as if he has just come back from the scene of that vengeance where he has been making a tidy pile of the ashes of the blasted for quick assessment by the Church and the Insurance Companies. A younger colleague of his steps forth as soon as he finishes and thinks to finish off Wally by reading from the booklet on sexual health. He tells in a simple paragraph of the many infections that can spring, toothed and terrible, from love; without suggesting what, in our barren field, might take the place of love; not even hatred. We feel that with these boys grouped around the torch weeding out our urges we are going to be short of sports if our wage does not rise to Alpine games, private orgies or trips into space. "Lust is ruin," ends the reader and Mr. Tregethin repeats this, plucking hard at the sleeve of Wally who is slumping against the girl, Mona, and does not seem to hear or care. The platoon closes. Wally and his friend are seen off the premises. There is a grim, brisk tone about the formation as it moves off as if Wally and Mona will be shot as soon as they get beyond the gate. They are safe until they get outside because the Council are fussy and awkward

about the use ratepayers make of the premises. As the lovers and the escort leave we can hear in the stone recesses of the yard the last word of Mr. Tregethin. "Ruin, ruin." There is a sort of ecstasy in his voice when he says it as if he were supping even then and with his own lips from some broth of unspeakable pain and despair. As we walk across the yard we try to work out the relative positions of Wally and Mr. Tregethin in this tomfoolery. The one lusts to do what the other lusts to forbid, and they both seem to get a lot of pleasure from just cancelling each other out. The average pair of humans, we feel, are two blacks gloating over the fact that they will never make a white.

We open a side door. It is a heavy door stiff in the hinges and garnished with a series of bolts and bars that rattle like fear and give the impression that we are entering at last into the place where man has hidden away the larger stocks of equality and kindness. We enter the corridor. It is quite dark save for a small mantle placed high on a wall. At one end of the corridor is the room where we watch. At the other end is the wash-up where our sleeping bunks are placed. From the wash-up comes the sound of a violin. This is the violin of Georgie Bryant who plays so badly his father has promised to stretch him out flat and senseless if he as much as picks up the bow at home; so he brings it along to the school on his night of firewatching and drives us silly faster than the war. George, who was at school with us until a few years ago, is now working as a kind of learner at the chemist shop of the Brothers Higgins, two elements noted in Mynydd Coch for their cough mixtures and their clean disinfected smell. It is surprising how much George has grown in knowledge and self-confidence since he has been with them. He has an elegance, a self-command that makes us wonder. He can always widen our eyes and make our ears tickle with his tales of what people say and ask for in chemists' shops. If a mere learner can do this for us we feel that a frank statement from the Brothers Higgins themselves would turn us upside down and black and blue with shock. George did not learn much when he went there first. He looked even younger than his age and a lot of the

clients, in search of mature advice and tricky paraphernalia, looked at him with disgust as if George were some kid left behind by a mother after weighing and found too light to merit the trip back home. They would rap on the counter for one of the Brothers. Then one day George put on a false moustache in a mood of quite idle foolery and in less time than it took the glue around his whiskers to harden he was operating as a kind of bureau for the puzzled. He picked up enough facts in a day to write a handbook for young adventurers in lane or park and of a quality to make the whole top of Wilfie's head go silver with marvelling. We are glad to know George and have him in our firewatching team. Compared with ours his being is completed, full of radiance. There is always an odour of expensive preparations about his person and this gives him, alongside such plain utility smells as ours, a suggestion of having been chosen and anointed.

George stops playing as soon as he hears us at the door. He knows our views on the way he plays the violin, views only one vicious body blow less bitter than those of his old man, and we have told him that when Spence and I decide to go totally off the hinge as a change from being conscientiously and unprofitably aware, and start flapping with total abandon, we shall sit down to a long recital of George on the violin playing sonatas scored for him, the rustle of Mr. Rawlins' gown and the trumpet of Ted Dolan.

We make our way up to the prefects' room. It is a small room from which most of the desks have been cleared out. There are three armchairs around the open fire, a gas ring for the boiling of kettles alongside the fender and on one of the tables a pile of magazines and games. Under one of the tables is a travelling basket full of mugs and a gigantic teapot. There are only two pictures on the wall and they are worth noting. They have found their way into this outpost after a long journey through various parts of the school from the room of the school's very first headmaster, a severe, craggy element who believed that boys should be kept in a mood of shadowed caution until the age of forty-five and he lined the school's walls with pictures of the type we now have in the prefects'

room, and some of them put such a long rusty blade through all thought of sin you could hear the gonads scampering for shelter all through the day. One of these pictures that we have to face on each night of duty is called 'This Way or That?' and it packs so much into a square yard you wonder how the frame manages to stick together. On the left you see a road leading up sheer to the summit of a cliff. This road is full of rocks and discomfort, the sort of road where you are likely to be caught many hard clips by bits of flying stone and your own boot as you come whirling away from some crumbling foothold. There are only two people on this road and they look as if they are enjoying every bruise and stumble. One of them is so dour he might well be that first headmaster, pouring ink and Dettol into his hormones to keep them wholesome, serious and useful. This rocky road is the way to heaven and there is plenty of room on it, as much room as rock. On the right of the picture is another road, flat as a good floor and jammed so tight with people there is no room to fall. On each side of this road we see cinemas, side-booths full of such voters as knife-throwers and midgets, pubs and whore-houses with stoutish, painted girls leaning out of the windows urging the people to enter and making a deep impression on all boys of our age who look at this picture. If there is any tittle of truth in this study, sin on that right-hand road is as common and easy to get as air in Mynydd Coch, and we can see those stoutish girls lining up for a swig at the bottle of tonic before they satisfy even half those voters who are milling about on the pavement waiting their turn at the sink. At the end of this right-hand road there is no turning or future but only a bright red glow and a small knot of voters who have just got there and are only beginning to get scared and scorched. We have known fire-watchers, boys who were not lucky enough to get the real facts slowly and urbanely from such a civilised medium as George Bryant, who looked at this picture for an hour or so then took to walking up and down the corridor talking quietly to themselves with a hint of madness in every phrase. The other picture is about the plague of frogs which was sent to punish Pharaoh and this is as sensational and little comforting as the

other. Into a large columned hall which looks as if it will wind up as a pyramid, come Egyptian nobles of the fat and purse sort whose appearance suggests that they may have come into this hall for the single job of having a fresh sneer at Moses and doubling the order for bricks. But the frogs have arrived and here are these elements looking revolted and terrified as they stick their hands down the neck and up the skirt of their short togas and find nothing but a wet and moving layer of toad and frog. Wilf has worked himself right into the spirit of this picture and his fancy has crawled forth as covered with revulsion and slime as any of those nobles. He says he knows and appreciates the provocation that lay behind the launching of those plagues but even so he thinks Moses should have known where to draw the line. With such capers as this of the frogs, he claims, Moses did harm not only to the heart of Egypt but also to the heart of man. We disagree. Spencer and I cannot see too much of these nobles putting their hand on this vest of pests and coming in for some part of the great plague of squalid inconvenience which they generally manage to avoid. But we feel pity all the same for Wilf when he jumps clean out of his bunk at night at the bare mention of anything damp and mobile.

As we enter the prefects' room Wilfie is sitting by the fire reading a volume of *National Geographic Magazines*. He is huddled over his book and deeply interested. He has it open at some article on Africa and he is clucking and fretting over a photograph of two African women with exposed breasts and a long tail of children stretched out behind them. We are glad Wilf is with us in this business of firewatching. We think it does his nerves a lot of good to be away from his parents who are generally off on some brooding tack. At the beginning of each evening of duty Wilfie as a rule is cheerful and serene, half convinced that the stars are in heaven for some purpose other than to fall singly and accurately upon his head. But as the night wears on you can see his mind creating a team of shadows around him which play with Wilf through as many rounds of sure-handed antics as a troupe of Japanese acrobats. When that process is well under way and Wilf converts you to

his own mood of shrinking rawness you can hear the footfall of calamity padding through the darkness of the whole world around.

"What's the matter, Wilf?" asks Spence, pointing at the magazine and wishing to know what lies behind Wilf's clucking.

"These people. Black, backward, with never-ending kids. What future is there for a world where people are so different? And why don't these women cover themselves? Even if the African men saw the light and found it's no good bringing kids into steaming jungles they wouldn't be able to carry out their good resolutions with such articles as these breasts staring them in the face like lions, unless they got short-sighted with the steam. I don't know."

"The younger Mr. Higgins, the chemist, would do for them," says George.

"What do you mean, do for them? They're done for already, by the look of them."

"He's got plenty of stuff in the shop that would keep them shapely and childless."

"Poison?"

"No, no. No need to kill them."

"That's good, George. I don't bear any malice. I'm sorry for what I said about those people being backward. Who are we to say things like that? I only said it because I was amazed on opening this book to see these women standing there so bare and so jocose. After such a covered-up place as Mynydd Coch it hits you in the eye and makes it ache."

"Higgins is the boy for them. He's got stuff behind his counter that would solve this whole problem. He's got stuff there that changes people's colour and stops them breeding and even wanting to breed as surely as a tile smack on the back of the head. Higgins, the younger one, says nobody's got the right to have kids if they can't afford them. He says there have been too many kids in places like Mynydd Coch who have had to stay in the shawl until advanced ages like twelve and fourteen, breaking the arms of Mynydd's mothers with their great weight, because they lacked the cloth to come out fitly

clad. But Africa's worse than Mynydd Coch. There's nobody in Africa who's black can afford kids. It's a poor place for black people to be in, seeing the rough way they live. So they'd be better off paler. Those black people are not nearly white enough, don't wear enough and don't know enough. So the slogan for them is bleach, breech and teach."

"That's clever, George. Did you hear that, Spence? Bleach, breech, teach. George made it up for the benefit of the black people. There's a touch of genius about you, George."

"Oh that's nothing. I get it from the younger Mr. Higgins. Now he's a genius if you like."

"Well somebody is anyway. Just think of those three words. Simple words sounding so alike yet so full of different meaning and advice for the coloured people."

There is a knock at the side door, not loud but furtive. We know it cannot be Mr. Rawlins because he does not come on duty until nearly midnight. Wilfie whose mind has been far away among the pains and problems of jungle life is startled.

"See who it is," he tells George.

"See yourself. I'm making the tea tonight and I'm staying here."

"Perhaps it's the police."

"No, the black-out's all right." Spence gives the curtain a tug. "Any case, who's ever heard of a policeman in Mynydd who knocked before coming in. If ever a policeman in this division knocks a door he's got a grudge against it."

"All right," says Wilf, looking embarrassedly at Spence and wanting to make a diversion before Spence commits himself to any further statement about policemen that will get us all into court. "I'll go. But I wish they'd put some more light into that corridor."

"Don't be afraid. There aren't any ghosts there any more. They've given up ever since Mr. Rawlins and your brigade started making all that racket with the milk bottles in the morning."

"That's right," says Wilf, trying to smile. "It's only a man or woman who knocks on a door."

He gets up from his chair. As his hand reaches for the door, George says:

"I don't know." George says this with a suggestive pout of the lips and we can tell by his whole expression that he has been reading the latest number of that book on popular science which gives out all the latest inventions. This book gives great delight to all the kids in the Cadet Corps who are convinced after reading about all the remarkable contrivances that are now being produced under the pressure of the war that life is shortly going to be made a lot less toilsome and simpler, that the next number will contain news of a pellet to do one's thinking for one or to make such a crumbling mess of the world there will be no point in thought. George is a busy reader of this magazine and sometimes he is not above inventing news of some invention which he knows will get Wilf's wits hopping with wonder.

"I don't know," says George again.

Wilf comes slowly back to the fireplace. He knows that George has been staring once more into some shadowed corner of scientific forecast. Wilf says you cannot ignore anything that George says now. If he were just a normal schoolboy and Cadet, then he could be given the bristles in every dialectical brush and dismissed as a loon. But since he has been linked with the younger Mr. Higgins only God knows what marvels he may not be coming out with next.

"What don't you know, George?" Wilf sits down. He believes in making himself comfortable to welcome any late bulletins on the approaching doom.

"Just something that crossed my mind and went."

"Ask it back again. I don't like these bits and bobs of thought. Let's have the whole thing."

"I had a pamphlet last night. It spoke there of a new bomb. It's a very special bomb, aimed at such blokes as you and us, watchers of the night and so on. You know how important this watching of ours is."

"Yes, yes. I know that, George. But what has this bomb got to do with my answering the door?"

"Well, this bomb is utterly electronic, a real graduate. It's called the knocking bomb."

"Oh, oh!" Wilf does a lot of noisy head-shaking and laughing, but his heart is not in it. He is trying his best to bury George and his revelation under a load of spontaneous contempt. He does not succeed.

"Knocking bomb? What kind of nonsense is this, boy?"

"Honest, now. They drop this bomb from a low altitude. They've got it fitted with an artificial brain and the power to move. It also has a torch in case it bumps into things with real brains. When it gets up after being dropped it looks around and makes for the nearest house. There are some boys back in Germany at some knob controlling the brain that helps it to pick out buildings that contain wardens and firewatchers. Then it goes up to the door of the building, bold as brass, and knocks. Somebody opens. The bomb has a loose bit on top which it nods by way of greeting. Then it says a few words of warning and propaganda to undermine the confidence of the voter at the door and starts moving in after him striking matches on his rear to light the fuse. This is part of The Hague convention that says all bombs must be polite."

Our imaginations sit in the corner bleeding and having the sponge pressed into their aching faces wondering whether to come out for the second round. We have often heard Nick Williams, a noted local thinker, say at the shop of Tonio, the Italian caterer, that in a fundamentally shocking and incredible age mental action can only go on if it is obstinate and a habit. We decide to keep in touch.

"Carry on, boy," says Spence. "That's a great step forward. Politeness is a big thing."

"Lord above!" says Wilf. He is being gripped hard, pinched into blackness by all the phantoms of probability. "It was only a matter of time before they worked it out. Really it was all in the *Boys' Mag* years ago. All they wanted was a reason for playing so much hell with people. Oh God, think of it though. Walks, talks, nods, strikes matches on your butts then

says it's sorry." His lips work nervously. "Oh come on, George. You've been stealing opium from Higgins."

"That isn't what I'd steal, boy," says George, leering, urging us to press him into giving us some more data on the pharmaceutical side of sin. That is how it is with George. One minute he is giving you the latest approach to internationally organised murder, and the next, tips on what props you will need to get from the shop of Higgins for some idyllic bit of dickering in that lovers' lane which winds behind the Black Meadow.

We all escort Wilf down the corridor. Wilf lifts the heavy latch. Outside pressed against the wall as if to keep in the shadow and out of sight are Wally Leyshon, the sailor, and his fluffy-haired friend Mona. A strong breath of beer blows in from the night air making Wilf shudder with an ice-cold guess. Wally has his fingers to his mouth and is looking excited and full of mystery. He presses harder than ever against the wall and edges towards the door.

"Sshh!" says Wally and Wilf's first move is to think that Wally is off his head and to say that he is sorry but even as a first-aid man there is nothing that he can personally do about it. Wilf tries to close the door. Wally has his foot inside and we explain to Wilf who the sailor is, not a maniac or a foe but Wallace Leyshon who was vice-captain of Rugby when we were in the middle school, but who now plays less Rugby and has more variety.

"Oh, hullo, Wally boy," says Wilf for whom nothing has been explained by this reference to Wally's school record. "What's up, Wally? What are you after, Wally?"

"Sshh!" says Wally again and we cannot see that he is making things any easier for Wilf. So, Spence steps in with a footnote.

"Mr. Tregethin's League, the hilltop platoon for the Protection of Our Girls, caught Wally spooning against the wall in the yard and they drove Wally and his girl forth, just like Adam and Eve."

"Adam and Eve?" asks Wilf, peering at Wally and Mona and seeming to be disappointed at finding them so ordinary.

"They'll be back," whispers Wally, almost crazy with frustration. "What's come over this place? I can talk to you boys as friends. You boys listen. I've been at sea two years keeping the sea open for little ships, the little ships, you know that song. Death at my elbow. I come home. I see Mona my girl, you know that song. We have a few gills of beer. We take our stations behind the wall of the old school for a little canoodle. . . ." He begins winking and chuckling and thrusting his elbow into Wilf's stomach and Wilf is moaning with speculation and pain. ". . . a little canoodle, see what I mean, and what better place for a canoodle, gents' size or boys', than behind the wall of the old school, our old school?"

"Good place, that, one of the best places in Mynydd Coch," says George, nearest in age and experience to Wally and claiming for that reason the right to back him up.

"Then a flash, a blinding flash. First I think I'm back in action and I think these leaves get shorter all the time. The whole place is lit up but there is no bang so I think it might be something to do with the pent-up way I have been feeling about Mona who brings out all the strength in me. Then the yard fills up with people laying hands on me and two blokes reading as hard as they can from the Bible. I think it's a burial service and I wouldn't be surprised to find myself being tied up in flags and tipped over into the boys' toilet. Then they march us into the street for all the world like a pair of bloody convicts."

"That was the platoon," says Spence.

"Platoon of who?"

"For the Protection of Our Girls," says Wilf and his voice for once is steady and assured as it always is when the statement he is making is full of capital letters. "There's a lot of evil and looseness in the world, Wally, as you probably know. Mr. Tregethin and his friends do a lot of good work protecting our girls from it."

"And who, you clever sod," puts in the girl Mona who sounds fuzzy and thoughtless and who does not know how much she is going to wound Wilf by her tone, "who are going to protect us from Mr. Tregethin?"

"Never mind her," says Wally, coming close to us. "I've got a favour to ask you boys. Seems there's no place you can be alone with a girl in Mynydd Coch now unless you're actually married or willing to rent out one of those old tunnels they dug in the big strikes and you know how damp and terrible they can be. I can't stand damp around my middle and I can't get married either because my mother isn't willing. So what about you boys letting us into the school for about an hour."

"What did you say?" asks Wilf weakly, gulping hard and hanging on to the bolts.

"Into the school, away from that bloke Tregethin and his platoon."

"Mr. Tregethin!" shouts Wilf, staring at Wally as if on balance he would have preferred a visit from that knocking bomb.

"Who is this?" asks Wally. "Tregethin's kid? I ought to brain him."

"This is only Wilf. He means no harm."

"I don't either. I go back tomorrow. You boys know how it is. Hasn't this League of Tregethin's ever heard about the war, Our Boys, democracy and all that?"

"They haven't heard about anything very much," says Spence. "That League is stone deaf to anything except talk of evil and the way it is spreading in Mynydd Coch. I don't mind for myself, Wally. Far as I am concerned, boy, you're welcome. But Wilf's the one to decide. He's the leader of this group and he's responsible to Mr. Rawlins. Wilf's all right but he's very narrow-minded." Spence drops his voice causing Wilf to bend forward suspiciously thinking that Spence might be entering into some kind of compact with Wally. "He's as rough on sin as Mr. Tregethin. His old man had cramp in the legs once and couldn't move from his seat and had to stay to see two performances of *East Lynne*. He's been bitter and cautious ever since. Wilf is an echo of that cramp. You'd better ask him."

"What about it, chum? For the sake of freedom and the old school."

Wilf thinks it over. We can almost hear him pushing back

the limits of his skull to allow him more room to grapple with this astounding notion of letting out the school as a house of licence. We stand silently aside. For ourselves we admire Wally's cunning in dragging in this mention of the old school and freedom to confuse Wilf with these emotionally conditioned words. But two centuries of Calvinism stand firm as concrete against the hot tide of challenge that flows out from the faces of Wally and Mona.

"No," he says. He pulls the door to and throws every single bolt into place. He does this with a deliberate noisiness meant to drown the jangle of his own unease. If Wally felt he was being marched from paradise when the platoon marched him out of the yard he must now feel that he is being directly lowered into hell and boxed and barred for eternity.

"Trouble with you, Wilf," says George as we face back into the gloomy interior, "you're like flint, boy. You're too hard to live. Against you, that Knox was a stoat."

"You treated Wally as if he were a dog."

"He was acting like a dog. He looked full of it. He looked worse than those raw chicken voters Benny was talking about."

"He's one of Our Boys. He needs helping, don't he?"

"And Mona is one of Our Girls. She needs protecting. She'd go down like chaff before the wind of Wally. It's no good pandering to these hungers. Let Wally hang on for a bit and cool. The night will soon pass and he'll be back in the morning to thank us."

"If he won't drown trying to settle down for the night with Mona in one of those tunnels. I'm beginning to think you're one of the things wrong with Europe, Wilf."

"Oh don't say things like that, George. I'm only acting for the best."

"You're afraid of Rawlins. That's why you slammed the door on them."

"Why not? You remember Edgar Humphreys."

As we complete our walk down the corridor we consider the case which Wilf is now asking us to remember, the case of Edgar Humphreys. Edgar was at school until recently. He

was a firewatcher. He found a strange couple, a man and woman, in one of the firewatching bunks. He is a cool boy, this Edgar. If it had been his bunk that was being used he would have told these people in a sharp voice to put down their bed and walk. But seeing that it is not his bed which is in question and use, he calls up the quick mind which he has inherited from his father who is one of the ruling class of Mynydd Coch after a long connection in the butter and egg traffic. The man said he was sorry but that they had been having trouble with Mr. Tregethin's platoon and with the ushers down at The Dog, our local cinema, who also seemed to be in line with Tregethin and kept squirting Flit at them at just those very moments when the last thing they wanted was to have themselves disinfected. So, would Edgar take half a crown to stand guard outside the wash-up and warn them of any interruption. Edgar said yes, took his money, congratulated this visiting voter on his choice of bunk and then gathered his friends and lined them up at the window in the wall at the back of the wash-up and charged them threepence a look. While this carnival proceeded, with everybody entering into the spirit of the evening and Edgar wondering whether this was the moment to challenge his father's place on the Chamber of Trade, one of the masters entered from an unaccustomed door. He watched the antics of the couple in the gloaming of the wash-up and then, being of a courteous kind, tapped on one of the porcelain bowls to introduce himself and told them that unless they were there on behalf of the Firewatching Committee to illustrate new methods of smothering the butterfly bomb, they had best be gone. The man and woman took this in good part but they explained their deal with Edgar and suggested that a breach of contract having taken place Edgar should give them the money back. This led to Edgar's being thrown out for two terms, transferred to the Advanced Commercial Class on his return and given a chance to think over the headmaster's thesis that men and women should not be treated with the same keen eye to easy money as butter and eggs.

"Catch me trading in lust, like Edgar Humphreys," says

Wilf, his voice sharp and full of dogma. We can imagine Edgar weeping in the shadow and preparing himself for the flames.

When we get back to the prefects' room Wilf busies himself making an inventory of the small research-section of the History library. There is little in this section now except for a few monster volumes bound in red leather, all, with few exceptions, being the memoirs of Welsh preachers. The exceptions are books by people who were not preachers but have found a lot of pleasure in remembering things about preachers. Mrs. Monroe has translated extracts from these books and we find their tone slow and far from the curt, laugh-a-minute standard sought by the modern reader. If one of these preachers saw washing hanging from a line at some such place as Cwm-yr-Efail where washing is about the limit of what you are likely to see, the fact would go down in the book of memory, together with a remark made in his next sermon that one day, given a fuller acceptance of the right doctrine by the torpid oafs who sat wearing their butts away in the taverns of the valley, the soul of Cwm-yr-Efail would be as pure as its washing. Then at the bottom of the page there would be a giant footnote explaining that after five generations of research the family to whom the washing belonged had been tracked down. We are given the trades and crafts in which the members of this family to the tenth collateral branch have served for the greater glory of this denomination or that: quarryman, grocer, miner, farmhand, insurance agent and all the other forms of hellish tedium in which the labourers of our fringe are free to whittle away their little stump of gladness. Wilf stands up for these books and at times other than when he is counting them. He says they give us a glimpse into the very laboratory in which the soul of our nation took its shape. We believe it is better to nose around thoroughly first and find out all there is to know about the present shape of this soul before digging up parties and sects from ages gone to blame it on and take the brunt of our bitter wonder.

When we see that Wilf is so busy listing and arranging those

volumes he will not notice what we are up to, Spence, George and I find ourselves edging out of the room at the same time. We close the door quietly and make our way down the corridor without saying a word. Spence reaches the side door first. He unbolts and opens it with sounds of approval from us. Our thoughts about those grim, fat volumes of vaunted self-repression in the history library make us all the more eager to be striking a blow of some sort for personal freedom. Wally and his girl are still there doing the best they can in their belt of shadow and glancing timidly from time to time over the wall over which they are likely at any moment to see the heads of the parading vigilants. We whisper to them to come in and avail themselves of the little comfort we have to offer. Wally mumbles his thanks.

"It's for the sake of the old school," says George in a firm voice.

We think George can well afford to use this firm voice. He has left and cannot now be booted out of the old school on a charge of adding carnality to the night-school curriculum.

"Thank you, boys, thank you," says Wally, dragging Mona behind him over the threshold. "This is going to mean a lot to me and Mona. We don't get much freedom. This is going to be a real night, I can tell you. You just watch me keeping the seas open for the little ships after this."

We thank Wally for this and tell him we shall keep his services in mind if ever we should begin to float. We begin to lead them down the corridor. Wally does not agree with this. He has his mind set on the wash-up.

"Not there, boy," says Spence, "too public by a mile. Somebody's sure to come in with ears like a spaniel and you'd be out on your back and fed to the boys in the platoon in less than five minutes."

Wally does not listen. He is mad for the wash-up.

"Don't be more than half an hour at the outside," says George. "Rawlins'll be coming on duty about half-past ten and for hearing he's the father and son of that spaniel Spence was referring to. He'd kill us if he found we were throwing the school open to spooners."

Wally and the girl vanish into the gloom of the wash-up. We hear his voice hollow-sounding in the tall emptiness. He tells us in this hollow way which makes it sound grave and sincere that he will be out from there in a jiffy.

"And for God's sake, too, be quiet, Wally, or you'll be having Wilfie after you like a police dog. He's as against love as the very dead, that Wilf."

Back in our own room Spence and George settle down to a game of fan-tan which is one of those games in which you can take out your brain and put it under the seat for a nap. I take hold of that magazine Wilf had been reading when we came in. He has turned the page down at those African photographs and for the sake of my geography I spend a few minutes studying those photographs of the natives. I cannot understand how Wilf can find room in one head for two such totally different subjects of research as those leather-bound tombstones of pious remembering and the nude open spaces that are a principal feature of these African studies. Perhaps it is not so difficult.

A short, heavy step turns the corner outside. We recognise its rhythm. This will be Mr. Richards who is in full charge of all firewatching operations in our part of the town. Mr. Richards comes charging down the corridor and into our room. We have not yet had much explosive dropped on Mynydd Coch but by the tone and bearing of Mr. Richards and particularly by the fine burst of speed he always puts on when coming down that corridor you would say that Mynydd Coch is the most bomb-tormented place in Europe. He has been to about fifty courses of training to fit him fully for this superintendency and he must be the most skilled firewatcher west of the Usk. If ever a fire-bomb falls between these hills we pity the man who drops it. His time will be more than wasted for not only will the bomb fail to cause any sort of a fire but, if Mr. Richards is anywhere near the spot on which it drops, it will be picked up and thrown right back at the man who let it fall.

Mr. Richards gives us all a cheerful goodnight as he enters. This job as organiser of firewatchers is the first he has done for

years, having been put aside with astigmatism and pit-spoiled lungs in early middle age. He has big shoulders and a confiding face. In periods of history that do not call upon citizens to be deadly earnest and keyed up Mr. Richards is one of the nicest elements in this division. He sits on the table. We all prepare to listen to what he has to say, all of us except Wilf. He has not noticed that Mr. Richards has entered, being absorbed in his librarianship, and trained to ignore totally these interruptions that take up most of our lives.

"A good scholar, that one," says Mr. Richards, grinning at Wilf's back.

"What's new in theory or practice on the firewatching front?" asks George.

"Not much. Went to a course last week. Very instructional, educational and genteel. Nice class of people. Mostly bomb identification. But nothing much that was new. Don't forget the big test next month. There'll be everything short of the actual fires and we'll work as a team. The Chief Constable will be here to watch and judge and we don't want any muck-up like we had the last time. That time we had some of the parties marching about like a lot of bloody nomads. We found some of them in Ystradfelyn, eight miles away. Some of the others were ringed around the emergency water tank like a lot of druids. No conception of team work. Nobody made any sort of report to me. 'Who the hell is Richards that we should go running to him every whipstitch with news of fires? Tell Richards to stop playing at these games and put away ambition.' That was the general tone. They don't seem to understand that without team-work and special training places like Mynydd Coch would be just one massive clinker in next to no time at all. Bloody nomads, the whole lot of them. On the wrong side of Europe, that's what I say about them. Too many anarchists about here for the fancy of any man who's got his heart in his job."

"Too many by far," says George. "That's just what Mr. Higgins the chemist says."

"There's a man who's come on," says Mr. Richards. "One sniff and he'll tell you what anything is. Not for nothing was

he made Assistant Gas Officer. A trained nose. Nothing like it. Brain and nose, working like a team."

"A fine thing, that."

"And your own Mr. Rawlins. There's another trained and indispensable firewatcher. He's got the scientific method. Have you ever seen him coming up on an incendiary bomb? Like a snake, quiet, smooth and deadly, a treat to watch and a model to study. He's promised to keep you on your toes in readiness for the big test. Who knows, we might have the real thing before then, the supreme test. That'll teach those ignorant sods who don't believe in taking advice from me and land up in places like Ystradfelyn. The enemy is getting desperate now. Some people heard on the wireless that Mynydd Coch was for it. There was a German in that bowls-team that was routed by the Mynydd Coch Rollers six seasons ago. They never forget a grudge, these Germans. When the bombs come, that bloody bowler will be behind them." Mr. Richards glances over at the still absorbed, unhearing Wilf. "A fine scholar, that boy. I know his father. A poor firewatcher but very thoughtful. His uncle Tude spent the longest period in the smoke chamber in this whole district. First we thought he was dead, succumbed as they say, but he came out grinning and giving out so much smoke with every word he uttered we had to warn the National Fire Service to stop bothering him. He said he once had to smoke a brand of fag called Peace and Plenty which used to lay people out flat right and left and since then Tude has found things like gas and smoke chambers mild and pleasant. Any little point you boys would like some final tips on?"

"Only one, Mr. Richards. That dragging tactic."

"Dragging what? The pump?"

"No. When you come across somebody who's out flat and you want to rescue him there's some special way of dragging him that you showed us. It was good but I've forgotten some of the measures you took to keep the bloke flat and below the level of flying splinters."

"Oh that. Would one of you boys like to act as my dummy? I'll make it clear to you in a flash."

"Well, we three are pretty good at it. It's Wilf is the one who's backward at it really. Only tonight before he went off into his coma with those books he was telling us he was a bit unsure about the details of this movement and also that if ever he should be the one who was lying flat and smoked and helpless there's only one man he'd trust to drag him to safety. That's you, Mr. Richards."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

This praise excites Mr. Richards and makes him sportive. He winks at us and sidles up to Wilf, his index finger raised to his mouth to keep us silent. Whatever lesson he is planning to teach Wilf we can see that he is bringing up the factor of surprise to hammer it home. We feel sorry for Wilf's being concerned in all this alertness but we are also sympathetic with Mr. Richards whose little bit of life is working up to one of its rare peaks at this moment and we sit still and watch. Wilf is carrying on with his task and has one of his arms outstretched to reach one of the books on the top shelf. Mr. Richards catches him around one leg and topples him off the chair on which he is standing. Wilf's head lands with a clear crack on the floor and for a few seconds we can see he is beyond caring. By the time he gets his wits back from their trip Mr. Richards, quick as a whippet, has got down on the floor as well and fitted himself into Wilf in the most intricate way, locking and immobilising Wilf as if he were a safe and Wilf a package of bonds. There is a confused whimper of questions from Wilf about this manoeuvre.

"Don't worry, boy, don't worry," shouts Mr. Richards and as we catch a glance at the agonised look on Wilf's face in the tiny intervals when Mr. Richards' busy rolling gives us a clear view, we all think in how much better a position he is than Wilf to do all this shouting and propaganda against fretting. Mr. Richards is now jerking himself along the floor like a caterpillar and bumping Wilf's head hard against the legs of table and chair as he passes and with every bump we can feel Wilf's agony and curiosity wane.

"What about pumping some of the smoke out of him,

Mr. Richards? He's looking full of it, blue like, you know."

Mr. Richards rises on his elbow and catches hold of Wilf's collar. Wilf is thin and easy to handle. Mr. Richards gets Wilf's torso rising and falling like the handle of a pump. Wilf, who was looking as if he might rally now that Mr. Richards has got clear of the last bit of furniture against which to bang his head, gives up the ghost at this. His eyes are half-closed, his face pallid and resigned, beautiful and relaxing to watch like the dead knight in a Burne-Jones picture which hangs in the French room. Mr. Richards throws him down flat again. Spence holds the door open and the convoy begins its crawl into the corridor. Mr. Richards, too old for work of this type and tempo, is now gasping and purple. His face and Wilf's lying close together there in the gloom are like a little patch of sky. His motions cease suddenly.

"God, he's fainted," says George. "Look at that now. Mr. Richards, stiff out and he trained to the hilt."

"Drag him back in, Wilf," shouts Spence. "The smoke's got Richards. Chance for a rescue here, boy."

Wilf, half dazed but chronically responsive, takes in as much of the situation as will appear to a person on floor level and remembering all the scraps of instructions he has taken in during two years of firewatching, begins the same snake-like antics we have just seen being performed by Mr. Richards. Wilf makes nowhere as good speed as the old instructor but we can see that he has mastered the general principle of the drag and we feel that there are not many people, especially people who have just been stunned and half choked, who could switch over from being victim to practitioner as nimbly as Wilf.

After crawling a yard, Wilf jumps up and stretches out his finger prepared to argue it out with Mr. Richards. When he sees the latter lying so still and beyond reason he shudders and sits down, demanding inwardly that he now be awakened. I run down the corridor to get some water from the wash-up. I find Wally and his friend Mona in one of the bunks. I regard this as a liberty taken by Wally and I try to explain to him

about Edgar Humphreys, Mr. Rawlins, the School Rules and the Nonconformist conscience. Wally, too busy to be bothered with these issues or even to talk plainly, mumbles something about the little ships and hands me a packet of duty-free cigarettes. I love tobacco. I do not hate Wally or the need he feels to fuse his life into that of this girl, Mona. So I shrug my shoulders and bow to the corrupt and inevitable.

I find Mr. Richards on his feet when I come back, smiling and sociable. He drinks the water I offer him.

"Funny thing," he says. "Funny how refreshing a little lie down can be."

Off he goes, tipping his hat and saying goodnight with the passionate friendliness of the bewildered as he passes the wash-up and hears a slight creak of wood from one of the bunks.

We resume our pastimes. But Wilf takes a seat, his books forgotten. He has passed beyond interest in the cosy, desirable tombs of our fathers. He is a single forlorn jitter. We all have, and Wilf more ornately than the rest, moods in which 'all living seems a series of lunatic and incalculable visitations. This experience with Mr. Richards comes under that head and Wilf is fast slipping down a long funnel of wordless amazement. Whatever fresh quirks might be shaping up to come out of the night will find a nimble reception clerk in Wilf. He sits there seismographically sensitive, willing to record the slightest tremor of the eccentric.

The tremors are not long in coming. From the still night air outside the room there is a distinct whistling. We all sit up and listen attentively. Wilf is like a pointer dog, his tongue lolling.

"Somebody calling a dog," says Spence.

Wilf's eyes snap down to the floor as if expecting to see this called dog making its way up through the linoleum sharpening its teeth for the big job of eating a firewatcher. Then there is a nearer sound, a ragged sound of hooting, as of an owl learning to hoot.

"A bird," says George. "A nightbird. When they hoot three times somebody dies."

Wilf's eyes dilate as he looks around as if astonished to see the three of us still there and looking healthy.

"It was the siren," says Wilf and jumps up. "Where are the helmets? Where are the pumps?"

"Sit down. That was a bird. The helmets are on the landing by the music room and the pumps are at the end of the corridor. So don't bother. Everything is under control. Whistle a lullaby, boy, and tell your nerves to listen."

Wilf says nothing. He sits stiffly, sucking hard to keep his eyeballs somewhere in the area of his head. From outside there is the sound of a hard object being dropped to the flagstones of the yard, a small object dropped from no great distance. Spence says it may be Mr. Tregethin, finding even within the clean, scoured dairy-chamber of his own mind the beetle of some animal desire and beating his head against the floor in dismay. There follows an intense hissing sound and we cannot link Mr. Tregethin with that. Wilf drops his head towards the window to listen more closely. The sounds are repeated. I feel George plucking at my sleeve.

"What if these noises are coming from Wally and that girl? Don't you reckon he ought to be stopped before he gets the roof down on us? He's driving Wilf mad."

"What would Wally be doing that would make all those noises? What would he do to whistle? Why should he need to hoot? And that hissing, what does that achieve?"

"God knows, but if you worked where I work you'd wonder."

Some gravel is thrown hard against the window.

"Now I know!" shouts Wilf and he is erect and certain like a prophet who has just heard that the facts have caught up with him. "Now I know who it is. It's that Richards."

"Why should Richards be going about with such antics. This is too long a performance for Richards. Why should he want to sound like so many different things?"

"He doesn't know. We don't know. Ever since the war started Richards has been waiting and training. He's learned more ways of dealing with bombs than there are bombs. Now

he's cracked under the strain. He's out there now," Wilf drops his voice, "just beyond this window, cracked and waiting, thinking he's a train, an owl, an air raid, a hose. That was the hissing, Richards directing himself like a jet against a fire that isn't there. That rattle of stones against the window was the sign that he is now ready to come back in here and finish off the job of going queer in real style. He'll see the flames coming out of us like he saw the smoke coming out of Uncle Tude and he'll tip every sandbag in Mynydd Coch over our heads."

The side door is thrown open. Wilf spins around and puts a chair between him and the door.

"That Richards has done enough to me for one night. I'm sick of the vibrations that go on in these fidgets of men. If Richards lays another finger on me he gets this chair right across his head."

There is a swift run of steps down the corridor, quite in the style of Mr. Richards. Wilf's grip on the chair tightens and he lifts it an inch or so from the ground in readiness for a swing. We wonder how long Mr. Richards will have to find himself on the school floor before he gets used to it and curls up there for good. Before we can make any reply to Wilf the door is flung open and Mr. Rawlins stands before us. He is wearing a special look. His mouth is open, breathless. His eyes are staring at us, uncannily bright and protrusive. One arm points stiffly at us and on his head like a cream layer that gives glory to a trifle is the biggest firewatching helmet we have ever seen. If it had not been tilted back nothing would have been seen of Mr. Rawlins' face. He would have been walking about like a thin tank.

"On your toes, on your toes!" he says in a voice three or four notes higher than usual.

We get on our toes. We are in no way to argue with a man helmeted and staring in the present manner of Mr. Rawlins. Standing there on feet that are practically vertical, we all look tall and puzzled.

"Down! I mean you were not on your toes at that precise moment. I was testing you. I blew the whistle. Gas warning.

I made a noise like a siren. I imitated a dropping incendiary and hissed in the manner of shooting flames. Then I threw what might have been a hail of bomb fragments at the window. Any decent firewatching team would have been out on the field two seconds after hearing the whistle, with helmets, pumps, buckets and ladders, ready for the tussle. But no. I go through practically every sound connected with warfare short of the groans of the dying and what do I find? You sit here as if at a picnic, gormless and cosy, card-playing and gossiping. It's little short of treason. Not a helmet, pump or bucket in sight. Are you boys in some private league with the salvage company? Do you expect the bomb to open the window after knocking on it and come in to talk the matter over with you? I am surprised at you, Wilfred. Your character is losing a lot of its old grip and directness. You spend too much time with such smoking and card-playing louts as Bryant and Preece there. Such elements consume the fabric of character like moths. Now at the double, get the equipment, unless you have already sold it to buy tobacco."

We race off. We get a helmet each from a large cardboard box outside the music room. We find the stirrup pumps, buckets and sand near the prefects' room. Mr. Rawlins marshals us behind him. Wilf is on tenterhooks, waving the nozzle of his pump and pulling at his helmet, eager to be at grips with danger.

"Tonight," says Mr. Rawlins, "we'll imagine that the bomb is in this corridor, near the wash-up there." He points to Wilf and myself. "First Wilfred and you, Lewis, will advance on it with the sand, keeping your helmets well down. You will throw your sandbags at the bomb. The bags will drop short. The bomb continues to burn. The floor-boards are now ablaze. I and the rest of the team will then advance with the pump. Now wake up, use your imaginations and do not be so pro-German as you've been hitherto this evening."

"Did you tell Wally?" I ask Spence in a whisper and even as I ask he and George are putting the same question to me.

"God help us," says Spence and as we look at the tense and

terrible resolution which is sinking like acid into the faces of Mr. Rawlins and Wilf we think Spence has just given us a good summing up.

We start off. We are passing the entrance to the cloak room, a solemn and comfortless chamber with rows of hooks on which the boys hang their coats and caps. Mr. Rawlins is halloing us forward as if this were a meeting of the Mynydd Coch hounds which used to meet in the days when the voters had a sufficient margin of security to keep dogs of prey. When Mr. Rawlins is not telling us to go to it and fear nothing, he is making a sharp, fizzing sound with which he tries to imitate the sound of a bomb and sharpen our sense of reality. Wilf is taking all this to heart. He really believes that all this sand we are lugging through the half darkness is part of some vital mission. He has pushed his helmet down too low. He has done this to protect his eyes from the splinters that shortly are sure to be flying about and from the intense heat which we will feel as we get nearer the bomb. Wilf cannot see through his helmet and every so often his head goes clanging into one of the columns of the cloakroom entrance, dazing him and deepening his panic. I feel an icy draught from the cloakroom and I look forward to the moment when Mr. Rawlins will take over with the hose. The cold does not bother Wilf. He is sweating. Nothing was ever more real than the bomb we are stalking now. He tells me to throw my bag. I do this with pleasure. A muffled voice from the wash-up tells us to stop this racket. This is Wally and by the thickness of his tones it sounds as if he has dozed off and been awakened by the noise of our manœuvres, annoyed no doubt by the clatter of Wilf's helmet which is now rattling like a castanet against the columns as his mood mounts in urgency and aggravated by the thud of sandbags at the very entrance of the wash-up. He is probably thinking that that gift of cigarettes should have given him more freedom from this sort of intrusive horseplay. He repeats his demand for peace and silence, this time in a voice less thick.

"Stop that shouting, Lewis," says Mr. Rawlins to me, thinking the voice to be mine and too excited to wonder why I

should be throwing bags of sand and asking for silence at one and the same time.

"That's right," says Wilf, feeling an almost pathological need to be agreeing with Mr. Rawlins. "Stop telling me to be quiet and keep your mind on the job." He tenses himself with a startling grunt and throws his own bag. He lifts his helmet to judge the accuracy of his throw. For a person who is looking at nothing but an empty corridor and a couple of sandbags on the dark floor of same Wilf manages to get more drama into his look than we work up in the course of a whole winter of play-reading in our group at the Library and Institute.

"Another foot and I'd have done it," he says, dropping his helmet back into place to shield his eyes from the glare at which he has been blinking hard for the last ten seconds. As I am marvelling at the slow, dawdling nature of reality in comparison with the mind of Wilf who can be scorched by a suggestion in the very place where I am being frozen numb there is some more heavy creaking from Wally's bunk. I cough in an effort to drown this sound, not wishing to have the same experience as Edgar Humphreys and be forced to hand back the cigarettes for breach of contract.

"Good God," says Wilf, reminded of smoke by my bout of heavy coughing and probably thinking guiltily that I am entering even better than he is into the spirit of this test. "The flames have now spread to the woodwork. Mr. Rawlins! The woodwork's caught."

This cry puts a glossy finish on Mr. Rawlins' zeal. He barks out an order at George and Spence. They come down the corridor at the double and in close formation. Spence is carrying a bucket of water and splashing himself well and George pumping and Mr. Rawlins, finder of path and range, walking ahead of them holding the nozzle and spraying the gloom ahead as if he were trying to clean it. We duck out of the way telling Spence and George what a fine job they are making of this part of the operation. We mean this and speak sincerely. We have never seen so much water come before from one of these pumps. If there were really a bomb present it would wish itself well out of Mynydd Coch. I also engage in

this round of praise and encourage Wilf to do the same to try to persuade Mr. Rawlins to keep on marching and squirting down the corridor and not to deploy into the wash-up. I pray too that Wally will alter his approach to love and lie quiet on his bunk for a change. But all this cunning and praying is a total loss. We hear a movement from the wash-up. Wally's face appears around the entrance of the wash-up, flushed, impatient, full of wrath and unused passion.

"Now look here . . ." he bawls.

Mr. Rawlins' hand jerks up instinctively towards the source of this noise. The squirt catches Wally squarely in the mouth. He bends his knees and skips to one side. Mr. Rawlins stands rooted to his own particular spot, staring at Wally. The only sound at that moment is the gasping of George, who has got into the swing of the pumping and cannot stop it, and the busy passage of water through air. Wally comes at Mr. Rawlins like a bull and changes to python as he gets his arms around Mr. Rawlins' waist. We hear most of the air coming out of Mr. Rawlins but we are more interested in Wally who has still got enough vigour left over from love and battle to be making an intelligible speech even as he is squeezing the life from Mr. Rawlins.

"Tregethin," says Wally, "I want you to listen to me, Tregethin. Between you and the Protection League and the war, Mynydd Coch is becoming a funny place to live in. What the hell have you got against joy, Tregethin? Has joy burned your home and drowned your kids that you should be as fierce against it as this? I've had enough of you. Out there you set your platoon on me. You lit me up with that torch as if you were putting me up for auction. Then you had those blokes reading at me from the Bible and threatening us with damnation and disease as if we were a couple of pagans being prepared for the rope. Those things were bad enough. But I never bargained for this. I should have guessed that you had a special method indoors but I'd never have thought it was as good as this . . . the whole damned lot of you coming up the corridor carrying buckets and washing all away before them with yourself on the hose and picking the targets. Now then,

Mr. Tregethin, we've had enough of this. There has got to be a stop to your antics or life will be slipping into the wainscoting and vanishing from view with all the other small and hunted things."

Then we see that Wally's grip so far has been only a clowning preliminary and he begins to put on supreme pressure. Mr. Rawlins' face goes the same colour as the gloom and it is only a matter of seconds before Wally will be throwing Mr. Rawlins' ribs away when they become a nuisance to the full free play of his fingers. Wilf stirs from his shock-trance. He darts at Wally to keep Mr. Rawlins in some sort of touch with breath. Wally's swiftly raised fist catches Wilf on the side of the face. I can hear Wilf's teeth rattling a yard away as if they are trying to give out some message. He goes back into the wash-up as if he were iron-filings and the wash-up full of magnets. Mr. Rawlins is now down on his back and Wally is dragging him through the tracks of water. The side door opens again. Mr. Richards comes in. He flashes a powerful torch and peers at the cameo in the corridor. He chuckles delightedly because he thinks this is a continuation of the demonstration we had in the prefects' room. Wally gives his highest roar so far, thinking from the huge flash that the rest of Mr. Tregethin's platoon are now closing in. Mr. Richards comes on to Wally and gives him a hard but friendly tap on the shoulder, saying:

"No, no, my boy. Not that way. That's not the proper way to drag the fainting and overcome to safety. You'd be easy meat for the splinters, the flying terror, half-standing on the job like that. Down, boy, down!"

Mr. Richards is as jovial as you like. He starts pulling at Wally. Wally turns around and catches the full gleam of Mr. Richards' torch. He gives another roar sticks one leg out and throws Mr. Richards over it. For an instant we can see Mr. Richards looking surprised at finding his face not six inches away from Mr. Rawlins but, civil to the last, remembers to touch his cap. Then Wally grasps Mr. Rawlins by the left leg and Mr. Richards by the right and starts dragging them both down the corridor, howling his curses at all the crabbed

and repressive elements still left on earth. He almost lights up the corridor with his wrath and force. He sings out his passion against all who stoop to unfriendliness and interfere with the smooth flow of the love-urge. He bears his burden along at a fair pace and we see no reason why in this mood he should stop at all until he has given Mr. Rawlins and Mr. Richards such a shaking he will find himself grasping only the legs.

All these cries bring the girl Mona at long last to the mouth of the wash-up. She looks intrigued, then astonished, and she turns to us for a short sketch of the events that led to two men being on the floor and trailed behind Wally like a sled. Spence explains as best he can. Mona rushes into the wash-up for her beret, runs down the corridor, catches Wally by the arm and manages to pull him from the building. We go to give what help we can to Mr. Richards and Mr. Rawlins. They are sitting up, wet, dusty, shaken and weary. But their surface expressions are quite different. Mr. Richards appears fairly satisfied.

"Not bad at all," he says. "But he should have got down a bit more."

Mr. Rawlins is looking Job-like. We help them up. We follow them as they make their way to the side door. There Mr. Rawlins, who is clearly fighting with an urge to stretch out his arms to gather his wits, turns to us.

"I am going home," he says. "That is, unless you four have not already arranged to have the place blown up or torn down in my absence. In your present form, I would put nothing beyond you. You are riding a high tide of dark devilry. I will make no inquiries at the moment into the disgraceful events which we have witnessed here tonight. One question only will I put to you, Preece and Lewis. How can you two manage to smoke so much with prices at their present level and still have enough money left over to hire professional ruffians in naval dress to assault the supervisory officers of the firewatching body in a corridor of the Education Committee? Now I shall go home. I shall change. I shall return to this school building, go to my room and sleep. If I am disturbed again for as much as a second there will be trouble for you so swift and terrible

there will be high laughter in the land of our enemies." He turns to Mr. Richards who is listening intently. "There is a mania, Mr. Richards, a lust for chaos and the void that is fast splitting this world in two."

They move away. We can hear Mr. Richards' voice as they approach the last few yards of earshot.

"Trust a man like you to spot that, Mr. Rawlins. That split, I mean. What's the cure? What's the method of approach? How is this mania, this lust, to be smothered? What about the old sand and water? There ought to be a course on it, a book with all the rules and a uniform, a little badge at least to show who are for this lust and who against, who for this chaos and who . . ."

The yard and the valley around fill up again with silence. We return to the prefects' room and put the kettle on for tea. The room has a cosy warmth now that works like a massage on Wilf's nerves. He loses his tautness. I shove that pageful of African women before his eyes and we can see the colour coming back into his cheeks as he registers the details. George sits on the table thoughtfully drawing up a list of conclusions from the night's happenings.

We hear Mr. Rawlins come in through the side door. He goes straight to the masters' staff room where he will sleep. We are glad he has not come to the prefects' room to give us a round of final admonitions. He is much too sombre for the blood if you have an overdose of his thoughts around midnight, especially after a session of insight into the mind of Wilfie.

We go to our bunks. We sleep but little. We leave the school at the first show of light. Mr. Rawlins is still sleeping. We have no wish to speak to him. As we walk down the hill to our homes there is a sunrise coming up over the hills that fills our every limb and muscle with a pounding music. Spence lets out a long loud note of singing.

"Ssshhh!" says Wilf, whose senses are still rocking and who is not at ease even in the earliest dawn.

Our eyes move up and down the valley. Even Mynydd Coch in its hollow has the beauty of utter harmlessness and peace. New dawns will come, new systems of ownership will come,

new and more crooked destinies for us who are young may come, new patterns of ambition, violence and anguish for nations in fresh and passionate resurgence, but all will crystallise and find peace around the tranquil, friendly indifference of these hills.

CHAPTER VII

WE MAKE our way to the cinema at the end of our street. It is called 'The Laugh and the Scratch,' or simply 'The Dog' from the way people have of itching after a few minutes inside it. Around the box office you always have a crowd of kids waiting to be taken in by older people and they very often get taken in. The older people make this concession, not because they have any love for these young elements whom they consider noisy and more in need of gaol than cinema but because, if driven to desperation through a long winter evening, these kids will create a whole seam of dark diversions like crawling into The Dog by the back way and setting the screen alight. A willing child can also come in very handy for giving the older people a long pleasant scratch when The Dog starts putting its spell on them.

We approach the portal of The Dog. It is not officially open yet. The man who stands at the entrance controlling the queue and sticking up the bills is Talfan Phelps. Talfan thinks highly of us because he sees us often about Mynydd Coch carrying books and every time we come into sight he greets us with "Ah, the scholars". He is friendly but unbright. He was out of work for so long that the shock of getting all these duties to perform in the porch of The Dog and a fine green uniform to do them in went to his head and he has become a chronic traditionalist and bitterly anti-radical, wishful only to apologise to the ruling groups for the sour things he thought about them during his years of idleness and under-feeding. He often stands outside the cinema with a large tin of Flit in his hands. He uses this article to keep The Dog pure and he also finds it handy to give a broadside of cold germ-killer to boys in the queue who give him too much lip. We have seen him, after he has been listening to those voters who attend the Discussion Group at the Library and Institute and who have no time for

ancient observance, look disgusted and handle his Flit as if he would like nothing better than to give the whole of Mynydd Coch a good squirt with it. Talfan, as part of the process of pinning his progressive ideal to the bottom of the ash-can, has developed a great fancy for the horrific and he is constantly slipping into the cinema from his outside tasks to rivet the attention of clients on something especially terrifying on the screen. He seems to believe that dread, brought to the right pressure, will always manage to dry up the sloppier urges of the liberal conscience.

Talfan comes on to us with a smile, after dealing with some kids who have been trying to start a general riot under cover of which they hope to nip in without any pause at the pay-box. We ask him what kind of show he has for us tonight.

"Very instructive and inspiring. I give you boys my word for it. After Monday and Tuesday of this show my mind is feeling really broadened. Very instructive." Talfan is packed to the scalp with phrases that are used by writers and newsreel editors when their heads are half-way to the floor with weariness and disgust. It is all part of Talfan's method of rubbing his head in the dust before a society that relented by giving him a job with a uniform attached to it and brought him in out of the tundra of the Social Insurance, minimum rate. If you can get used to the sight of a grown voter standing in front of you covered with penitential ash and dripping spare opium at every pore you will get used to Talfan.

"Give us the details, Talfan. You're a sod for education."

"The newsreel itself is a real treat. Splendid speech by the P.M. That's the Prime Minister. He sums up the best in Britain. He stood up when we stood alone. Democracy's last bridgehead. Bulldog breed, don't talk. He breathes on freedom's embers." Talfan hitches up his shining belt, makes a V sign with two fingers and grins in the manner of Mr. Churchill. If we could see any of freedom's embers about we would bring them to Talfan on the double for a little quick blowing because if there are any of these articles in Mynydd Coch they must be guttering badly between silica and sadness. When Talfan is in full spate and touching his richer seam of re-

membered slogans we feel like going home, changing and registering for a session of sweating, bleeding and empire-building. In these moods he glows like a lighthouse, amazing us and playing hell with the shipping in the channel.

"Isn't there anything else on?" asks Wilfie. He looks alarmed. He thinks from Talfan's tone that the whole of the evening is to be taken up with this speech and the usual advertisements. Things have been drifting that way for some time past, with the propaganda content of films and Talfan rising fast and approaching coma point, and now we think the bacon has finally been brought home and The Dog given over once and for all to the task of putting wind in the sails of statesmanship. The porch fills with the whiff of old and infallibly anticipated metaphor.

"That's only a sampler," says Talfan. "The speech only sets the tone. You ought to see some of the bombing that goes on in that newsreel too."

"During the speech?"

"After, boy, after. We're scourging the Rike. That's what we're doing, boyo, and no messing. We will give the foe no rest. We will lay our eggs on the Baby-killers. We will free Europe even if there's nothing left of the bloody place when we get there."

We dip our heads. We remember the day when Talfan officially smothered the last of his libertarian notions and got himself certified as an eighteen-carat jingo. The older members of the Mafeking Club, mentally the most static body in the zone, staged a march past the portals of The Dog to celebrate Talfan's emergence from error and carking discontent, with Talfan standing like a ramrod with his paid-up Insurance cards in one hand to show that he could now laugh at the dole and his tin of Flit in the other to suggest that the old bug of protest which had crawled about his brain during his years in the wilderness was now flat on its back and breathless. We agree with the voters in the Mafeking Club. This boy is worth saluting.

"What are the big pictures?"

"Very good for morale, both of them."

"Oh God, that sort again. Why don't you take our word for it, Talfan, that our morale is stiff as a board and sound as an apple, and show us some cowboy items again for a change."

"The first of these pictures shows you the Nazi horror as it really was."

Talfan is delighted as he says that. He has grown a long, questing tooth for the inhuman, regardless of source or agent, on which he is perhaps relying to gnaw the last ounce from his own mutilated sensibility. He is sucking assurance from some odd refuse.

"Have all the others been lying then?"

"They've kept a veil over part of the truth. They didn't want to horrify us too much."

"This must be worse than 'The Mummy'," says Wilf uneasily. This picture that Wilf mentions was one that put more voters on the blink and queueing up at the clinic than any other we have seen. It dealt with some voter in Egyptian ceremonies who was dug up from under a pyramid and kept walking about until he fell in love and crumbled back to decent dust. Talfan said the mummy should have known that love is no thing to be fooling about with when you are three thousand years old.

"Couldn't be," says Spence. "That bloke with all that bandage and the dust falling from his eye in lumps every time he winked. No modern man could have the edge on that mummy. He was the limit even for The Dog."

"Very horrid, I admit. But in this picture there are people in such a state, you just see the wink. No body."

We prop up Wilf who is beginning to sway.

"Look at him," says Talfan, pointing at Wilf. "It's catching him before he sees it. I don't blame him. Most of the people can't bear to look at the screen. Mr. Jaxley the manager thought that this was just evading the truth. So he told Merlin Pugh the operator to find himself some place to hang from on the ceiling and turn the beam on to the floor off and on so that all parties could be given their fair dose of the naked issue. But Merlin Pugh says there's no fit place on that ceiling for an ape to hang on let alone an element who got out of the army

due to chronic giddy spells, so he tells Jaxley to make his own arrangements with regard to these people who are dodging away from the truth. It catches them on the raw properly, this picture. I had to march up and down the aisle squirting cold Flit at the fainting people. You know that Jonathan Wallace the Ash, the very black-haired bloke who goes around for the Council with a cart emptying the buckets and keeping the town cleaned and wholesome?"

Talfan gives us time to recall the features of this Wallace. We remember him quite well. He and his dark complexion and cart are well-known parts of early morning life in Mynydd Coch. We cannot understand why Talfan pauses for so long unless it be that he is now priming us for some stupendous item such as a description of Wallace waiting for Talfan to complete his round with the Flit then going around the aisles arranging in neat bundles in the Council cart all patrons who have died of fright or truth during the showing of this film which lifts the veil.

"Yes, yes," says Ted. "We know this Wallace back and front. What's he done?"

"Well, he went grey as a badger here last night."

"Get away! Take your head off the hob, Talfan."

"As a badger. And you know how black he is about the hair."

"Very black. Like a raven. As black a head of hair as you'll see in Mynydd since trouble started bleaching the voters. Very pretty to see the ash settling on him. That's what that greyness was. The ash, settling. He forgot to brush it off. Very lax as well as black, Wallace."

"Don't argue, Dolan. As a Looker you know a bit more than I do about what's coming but you can't bicker with me about what's come, especially in The Dog. He went grey all over."

"God help us all," says Wilfie in a voice that ravel faster than an old singlet.

"This Wallace is one of the worst escapists in all Mynydd Coch," goes on Talfan, "and he wanted to avert his eyes from this picture. Always stitching thick bloomers for the truth,

Wallace. But his wife who is by him thinks that when Wallace is wiggling his head to escape the horror of the revelations on the screen he is doing no more than ogling other women. So she catches him a fetcher with the handle of her bag and tells him that any more of that and she'll be settling for him. So Wallace gets a headful of the naked truth. This picture chills him to the marrow. The astounding facts are right against the back of his skull like flood-water. No escape for Wallace this time. He tells his old woman about his marrow being chilled and puts in for a bit of quiet massage to get the ice from around it. But his wife says there is a time and a place and these are not they. The next time she turns around she shouts on Mr. Jaxley the manager to have him explain who the grey-haired delegate is who has come to sit by her. This is Wallace, grey as a badger, whitening fast and trembling with terror, a warning and an example to all those who wish to whittle away their lives emptying other people's buckets and ignoring the world situation. Now stand back while I open the doors."

There is a rush of kids into the entrance, making towards the pay-box. These kids are not supposed to go in without parents or guardians. They see things just as peculiar at home as they do in The Dog but as they do not have to pay to look at home it does not make so deep or bruising an impression and that is why they have this rule about parents or guardians. The way they get around this at The Dog is either to sap and burrow and come up through three loose floor-boards in the eightpennies or take any kid who is over ten or tall for his age and put him forward as a parent, bolstering up this argument with references to India where infants have been known to pause on certain days looking worried and wondering whether to get born or married. As for guardians nobody would undertake to guard these kids unless he were armed or strange to Mynydd Coch. Talfan makes the best of it. The flood passes him on its way to the box-office. He looks pleased to find bits of his uniform still sticking to his body when he finds himself in the clear again. The girl in the box is a ginger-haired girl called Beryl. She is very fond of Talfan whom she regards as better looking than any of the people on the screen inside and

wiser than any other human walking. This comes from the cribbed and colourless life that Beryl leads with a houseful of small sisters and the fact that all her urges are tickled into a state of golden readiness by the crimson braid on Talfan's poked cap and his habit of washing several times a day even though all the Flit he handles keeps him so fresh. Talfan has also made a deep impression on Beryl with his keen interest in world affairs and his being able to count and give out whole and intelligible sentences from the speeches of allied leaders, especially Chiang Kai-shek, whose opinions he quotes in a kind of jerky whining pidgin English which strikes Beryl, whose mind is as cramped as the box in which she crouches and feels no real pain even when struck, as genuine Chinese. Even as she tears off the ticket and takes your money she often gazes at Talfan with an eye full of beaming love which makes her tiny niche look as iridescent as a popular shrine. It seems even more like a shrine when love makes her give the wrong change, and there is many an element who makes spare pocket money by encouraging Beryl in this weakness and praising Talfan's looks and brains thirteen to the dozen and tipping him for the council at the next change-over. These tactics work even when Beryl is in a cool and diligent mood which shows that in the far shadowed recesses of her being she has knitted a thick cosy around her conception of Talfan.

We wait for the kids to get inside before taking our tickets. Even with the extra tax there is still no seat in The Dog priced at more than tenpence which is cheap even for the sit-down, as wartime prices go, and even in the subsequent decade of inflation it will go to no more than a shilling, which, says Leo Warburton, is contemptible by really urbane standards. We have people coming into Mynydd Coch from areas where the cinemas are newer and dearer and looking at the price list of The Dog as if it were a curio or a part of old Arcady. Wilfie has taken Talfan's remarks about the main picture badly. His nerves are going like a harp. If they are plucked any more loudly we shall have to put our heads together and start singing 'All Through the Night' out of sheer courtesy to speed on the twilight of the Celt. He looks pale and shrunken. His

father has fed him for years on such ineffably delicate topics as the soul and he has a weak stomach for horrors.

"They should have stuck to 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'," he says. "If we gave these fairy stories enough time to incubate there would be a lot more charm and transformation going on. What's in the old and filthy mischief of men that keeps us goggling at it all the time. Snow White. That's one sort of picture I could see every night. No mischief. Men are like monkeys and Rawlins can wrap it up as much as he likes. The more you watch them the more they scratch. They'll kill you just to show off, and as a kind of reward for watching them. But Snow White. . . . No blood, no speeches, no Nazis or Japs or agitators, just dwarfs too small to do you any harm or to be called up or stuck in war factories. . . ."

"That's a white-livered attitude," says Talfan. "What's the matter with your liver, boy? That's not the tone the P.M. would like, you can venture."

"I'm not talking to the P.M.," says Wilf petulantly.

"Good job too. We got to harden our hearts against the ruthless hordes."

Talfan pats himself on the chest as if to say that from the pelvis up he is pure concrete.

"That's right," says Spence. "You've taken in the message whole, Talfan. Alongside you we can see Wilfie's liver quivering in the wind, white and cold like a lily of the valley. You sound so much like a sound-track, if you could get hold of a celluloid shirt we could pass you off as the eyes and ears of the world. And don't you worry about Wilfie's heart. It's getting harder all the time. Mr. Rawlins at the school is giving Wilfie treatment on behalf of the P.M. He pushes a knife into the heart of Wilfie to see if it is done. One day the knife will come out clean and Wilf will be fit to scowl at the ruthless hordes and stand beside you to cheer. His heart will be full of holes but hard like a little stone and full of earnest beliefs like yours, Talfan."

"Glad to hear that," says Talfan. "Beats me to hear any Mynydd Coch boy talking as if he was half-hearted in the fight against the forces of darkness."

"Tell him about my weakness, Spence," says Wilfie, not wishing Talfan to take him for a coward.

"Wilfie's heart has got something, a murmur or a whisper."

"What's it whispering about?" asks Talfan suspiciously. The very mention of whispers or murmurs sets his wits jangling with thoughts of spies. He has already detected hints of subversion in Wilf's tone that put Wilf well within the category of potential traitor. In addition the porch of The Dog has been for years full of posters about careless talk that send Talfan's light, fragile mind streaming down the same path.

"It's not whispering about anything in particular. It's just generally talkative. If it thinks of anything that may interest the voters of Mynydd Coch it says so in the sort of quiet voice you would expect of a locked-up thing like a heart. But one day it may start shouting and when that happens, Talfan, we will let you know and you can shout back. Then we can all listen."

"I will do that."

"What's the second picture like, Talfan?"

"Oh, much lighter."

"What does he mean by lighter?" asks Wilfie softly. He has dropped his voice because he thinks by now that any remark of his however harmless and well meant will have the effect of aggravating and provoking Talfan.

"Talfan's notion of a lighter picture is one that sends the patrons home still in their right minds and where the characters are humdrum and die in bed instead of being dropped into cellars and kicked to death by some casual maniac who wishes to work his boot into a better fit."

"It deals," says Talfan, "with Japs. The little brown devils. They think they're cunning but they're outwitted in this picture all hands down."

"Ask him what's light about that theme," says Wilf, baffled. But Talfan is off on some new job before Spence can put the question to him.

We buy our tickets and go upstairs. The show has not yet started and we sit quietly and watch the peeling, half-erased mural paintings that were once the especial splendour of The

Dog until condensation on a scale only a few drops short of flooding plus some stray rubbing on the part of restless customers started wholesale removals.

We wait for the lights to go down. There is much fuss from Talfan, Merlin Pugh the Operator and Gwladys the girl with the torch. Gwladys flashes her light on people who stop dead in the aisle on their way to their seats and become centres of dangerous congestion as succeeding waves of clients pile around them like polyps on a coral reef. We see two young elements who look as if they have just come back from trying to borrow a brain for their joint use or from posing as a textbook illustration of the type-lout standing one on the other's shoulders and changing around the wooden boards above the two toilets which tell you which is the ladies' and which the gentlemen's. Ted Dolan, delighted at first by the cleverness of this move and shouting over to the louts to keep at it, is persuaded by Spence that this kind of antic is anti-social and Ted goes across and drops the two lads downstairs. Wilfie gives a lot of thought to the possible results of this switching of boards.

"Good God," he says as his thoughts move towards full force and highest flight. "Just imagine me in there, in the act, in all my shame, perhaps whistling or singing and not giving a damn, perhaps even showing off in some private sinful way known to boys when, smack, in walks some woman, perhaps some woman noted for her pure, upright ways like that Jennifer Rowe the Glow, that staring woman who preaches off and on at the Gospel Hall."

"What do you think she'd see so special about you, boy?"

When Merlin Pugh the Operator up in his little box starts operating there is a shout from the audience. You will notice that groups of people in Mynydd Coch are always fond of shouting in this way. They shout almost as if they have life in front of them going deaf, blowsy and indifferent and they want to remind it that they are still hanging about waiting for their turn at the booth where the sweet things are handed out. Part of this particular shout may be to encourage Merlin who has only been doing this job since his brother Aneurin went off to

the war. When Merlin began this job at The Dog his way with the projector and the rolls of film was not very bright. Sometimes we would sit for an hour with the place in darkness and nothing on the screen, the audience scared into silence by the thought that this might be part of some new wartime discipline and Merlin sitting in his box as complacent as you like projecting the whole of a seven-reel film on to the wall behind him, and not conscious at all that relations between him and the public were in any way odd. Another method which he mastered was to show films backwards and we got used to the sight of a man right at the beginning of a film being buried, then shot, then drinking gaily with his friends, then working his way up gradually to being a baby, throwing in his mother's courtship as the final climax. Merlin even went so far as to defend this way of projection, claiming that it saved a lot of wear and tear on the nerves, there being no anxiety about what was going to happen to the principal character. "There are many ways of winding up in this life," said Merlin, instancing some of the rougher destinies reached by some of the more luckless voters of Mynydd Coch, "but only one way of being born." He held on to that view for a long time and it was only after a bitter discussion on the point with the boys at the Debating Club in the Library and Institute that he consented once more to show us actors on their normal pilgrimage deathwards. He also contrived so many breakdowns of the projector that The Dog became quite popular even with people who hated films since they were not likely to be bothered overmuch with Merlin at the helm. If he had been taking an occasional bite at the film the thing would not have appeared to be falling to pieces more regularly. Nor was the quality of the talking-machine good during that early period, but that improved a lot when it was discovered that Gwladys, the girl with the torch, was putting bags of monkey nuts for safe keeping in the mouth of one of the amplifiers and her arm and shoulders into the other whenever she had a moment off from signalling customers to their places and cautioning elements who fell from the gallery into the pit to land in the empty spaces where they were not likely to do any damage.

The newsreel comes first. Great bombs drop on a marshalling yard. The commentator has a thin refined voice and by the sound of him, his frank gloating over the fact of destruction as such, regardless of its object, just so long as it keeps his nerves in a tingle, we are reminded of a lad who has no brother to put a shoe in him when he pulls things apart to show his genius and we feel that this commentator would be just as delighted if these bombs were dropping through the roof of The Dog and upon our heads, more delighted probably if he had come from hearing a lecture in easy words and with slides on the menace of an organised and rapacious plebs. It makes us feel that the division of mankind into such untidy groups as nations is crude and fruitless. There are amateurs of bomb-dropping and others. Talfan seems to have caught the ripples of this thought, caught it as it plops with dark-edged intensity in the air around our heads. He is striking his knee with his fist and enjoying the imagined vision of limbs being blown to the four corners of the screen.

"Mynydd Coch should have had a couple of plasterings like that," he says.

"Whose side are you on, Talfan?" says Ted.

"Oh ours. Definitely, boy, ours. What I mean is, Mynydd Coch would be more on its toes."

"After a few sessions like that, Talfan, with Einstein and Jack the Ripper winking hard at each other on the job, Mynydd Coch would be more on its back. And it's flat enough already for my liking."

"What did we have? One measly twenty-five pounder on Jones the Farmer's field. That's no ordeal."

"All right, Talfan. I'll go up and tell Jones. I'll explain to him why you think the German effort in these parts has been too sketchy for words. I'll get him to send the bomb back and put in for something heavier with a request that the thing be aimed without fail at his head next time."

The next film is the serial. Mynydd Coch is one of the few places where you can still see a serial. These items, full of adventure and suspense and four-ply faddle, are as good as sunstroke, nirvana and even death for keeping whole popula-

tions in a deep doze. Mynydd Coch is so full of these serials we think Jaxley, the manager of The Dog, has been left enough money to hire them for ever by some element whose thoughts were hurtful and who wished to show his grudge against the mind. It is only the efforts of such products as Garfield Llewellyn, the young thinker down at the Library and Institute, that keep those who attend The Dog from going out on pay-day, getting a large-sized bottle of woad and assembling on the town square, naked, blue and ferocious, to sharpen Boadicea's scythes and organise mass butchery of the pensive and a jihad against consciousness. This serial which we are now to see is called 'The Ghoul' and it is meant to rivet you to your seat even if you do not, as you often do in The Dog, sit on a nail so large that you speak in a hard metallic tone when you call Talfan up to complain about it. Wilfie groans and dips his head in self-defence at the mere sight of the title. A world without ghouls would suit Wilfie very nicely.

"You just watch this," says Talfan and then goes quickly down the stairs as he hears Beryl call him. "This ghoul is bloody terrible."

He is. We have to keep an eye on Wilf or he will be shuddering his way over the short balustrade.

Just before the serial's end Sammy Price comes in and takes a seat alongside us. He sniffs. "The Ghoul must have been good this week" he says. Sammy is very sensitive in this matter of letting his nose function as part of his brain. He can tell by smell what a film has been like even when he has not seen it. He holds the deadening properties of this serial about the Ghoul in high regard. For every reel shown, he says, ten thousand people are added to the list of those who will not take the trouble to vote at the next election.

The next film is a good example of how lucky our generation will be to get through the next ten years with any mind at all short of by coating the outside of our heads morning and night with some strong preservative to keep out the ideological weather and its rusting heaviness. It deals with a band leader and we feel from the start that this item is going to hang a long

jet tassel from our every mind. The band leader is a good sample dug from a rich seam. When the race finally reaches responsive narcosis, which seems to be the aim and ideal of those who direct our doings, this element will be canonised a lot more quickly than Joan of Arc. He makes his first appearance going around the various instruments of his orchestra playing them all in turn, throwing away what we take to be a lot of breath in so gasping a world, astounding the boys in the fivepennies and working up to a jerking, frothing bout of shamanistic catalepsy on the drums. He begins to sway and grunt and a lot of the younger patrons, including Ted Dolan, begin to sway and grunt with him and the darkened cinema becomes mobile and noisy, like a sty in eclipse. A man sitting near us with a girl observes the girl's jaw falling and her body rocking to the rhythm. We hear him say: "Be still, for God's sake, and give a chap a chance."

We see the whole point of this voter's dilemma and we utter a shush at the girl and say "Be still, be still". I see Sammy's face white, quiet and full of thought leaning forward to lose nothing of these developments. We give our attention to the screen again. The producer of the film is eager to bring the war into it. If the war dragged in by the producer was a war against band leaders we would support it and join Talfan in the porch wearing turbans and calling upon the faithful of Mynydd Coch to help us in this holy war against the writhing and the oversexed. We foretell a sultry twilight being brought on by these sonatas scored for windy goons and brassy gonads. But the war dragged in by the producer is the war of which we know, the traditional one of nations and races which is currently thinking up some slight permutations and it seems that the band leader takes a light view of it. He does not go so far as to write lyrics praising pan-Germania and Shinto and nodding friendly at the revisionist Powers, but you can see him grinning in a scornful way whenever one of his men lays down flute or clarinet or whatever, says to the leader that music is but foolery and there is a job to do, runs out and comes back, uniformed and resolved, but failing to put the band leader to shame. He has less conscience than his baton. Much less,

says Ted Dolan, who claims he saw the baton twitch at the sight of a recruiting poster in one of the first sequences. It is explained that the leader is not called up for the army because of some physical unfitness. From the way he shapes up challengingly to all the women in this film who are young enough to stand up without being pulled or threatened, we judge that the defect which is keeping him off the parade ground is something slight and technical like a flaking skull. For ourselves we agree with Sammy that this man is being kept in civilian life at the express request of the American General Staff whose general view is that their function now is to discontinue the peace-time trend of helping the Japs. The leader is giving a concert to wounded troops. Even here he does not abandon his heartless, elfin neutrality. When one man, sorely stricken, asks him for an old-time waltz to ease and break the purulent head of an old nostalgia, he hurls himself skittishly and with a raw cynicism into the most rabid swing tempo. He outdoes himself, outdoes us too. He does not play anything unless you except the very fine bit of playing he does into the hands of the anti-thought party. He rolls his eyes through an orbit so wide he surprises us at one point by staring at us through his ears. The rhythm is a lance and it is running him through and through and this is one metaphor we weep to see running ahead of reality. His long hair falls over his eyes and as the beat of his mania quickens his body falls into a crouching posture and he is drawing his fingers with incomparably allusive intensity over his knee-caps, and at least half a dozen girls sitting down the front jump both the adolescent stage and the short barrier that has been placed in that part of the cinema to keep the audience's feet from the screen. His crouch becomes more pronounced and he is now rubbing his knee-caps with his elbows. Give him time and he will be rubbing his knee-caps with his shoulders and he will have the best-rubbed knee-caps in Mynydd Coch if you count out Wilfie's father who gets massaged for rheumatic trouble in that quarter and Willie John the Don, a handsome young voter with eyes and moustache of jettest black who lives in a street called Druids' Crescent and who is stroked by the maidens as regularly as if

he were a length of fancy material. Between the band leader's posture, eyes and hair, he now looks like a Bushman being deliberately awkward and offensive with a missionary. They now have the camera close to his face and with that curtain of hair falling you need infra-red eyes and ears of the same brand to tell whether he is singing or not. He is out on some remote, conceptual peak, closeted fast in the bedroom stage of his imagination; by the contorting anguish of his stoop, he might be pinned beneath the bed. People coming into The Dog at this point take one look at the screen and say that he looks worse than he did last week. They say this because they think the band leader is the Ghoul less dignified than usual. When the camera moves back they see that he is not the Ghoul, being shorter, more musical and fonder, no doubt, of green things, being in all ways that matter a goat. Suddenly he stops. He stops dead. At first we think he is dead and we prepare to compliment the scenario writer on a clever and welcome twist. We think he might have been shot by some sneered-at veteran or thrown-out mistress and we intend to cheer this wise thrust in the midst of so much indiscriminating violence. He is not dead. He has seen, among his listeners, one of the old members of his band. This bandsman has played a distinguished part in some action in the Pacific and is now badly wounded. He is looking wan and has a medal. An officer comes in and pins another medal on him to emphasise his heroism and to make certain that the dozier voters in The Dog really know the first was a medal and not some metal contrivance used to attach the bandsman to his bed. A group of nurses and social workers come around to admire the wounded man, fingering his medals and cooing to a pitch that blots out the background music. The band leader is annoyed by this distraction. He sticks out his chest but no one hangs anything on it. It is no promontory and goes unnoticed. He has a few words with the ex-bandsman angling to get the spotlight back on himself. The hero speaks of the perils and hazards he has faced and survived.

"Worse than getting my first job," he says quizzically and we, who have seen the faces of those young elements who

queue up at the Juvenile Employment Exchange, can well believe him.

The band leader listens, his eyes glued on the medals and the nurses. He appears to be getting the global struggle in new perspective. He even goes so far as to play an old-fashioned waltz for the hero whose insides are curdled with longing for some girl back home. We can see that big changes are going on in the band leader and drawing a bottle-brush through the small space where he keeps his brain when he is not using it to keep the window ajar on stuffy nights. The bandsman asks him a favour. The leader, still boggling at the medals and the nurses, wondering which he would prefer to have pinned on him and busily casting up the dividends of valour, says anything, boy, anything. The bandsman says he does not want to go home in this condition. He wants the band leader to go to the farm where his folks live and assure his father that he is quite well and will soon be back. We wonder what this bandsman has against his parents, wishing a voter like the band leader on to them. Some dark Oedipus-motive here, we think. The band leader is moved by this, says that if he were only half well, and here he puts on a look wanner by a whole shade of cream than the hero's, he would be out there himself, doing the job. He points and stares at the Pacific. Stout Cortes, gone slim with time and on a shrinking earth.

But the band leader is not genuinely reformed. The film has forty-five minutes to go and there are limits to the public's tolerance of the regenerate. This has a further zone of lying, lascivious tootling and capering to traverse yet. In the very next scene we see him at some night club competing for floor space with sin and high prices and uniformed hierarchs, speaking ribaldly of the war effort, scoffing at the wounded and swinging his way from woman to woman and scratching under his arm with the double bass to keep in with his uncle who has just married into a select family of baboons. He goes back to hot rhythm and has himself sprayed with lysol to efface the shame of that solitary waltz he was beguiled by sentiment to play for the hero. For laughter's sake he decides

to take a look at that farm. He tells his drunken friends that the coming of Spring always gives him the urge to burn down a barn or two especially now since satiety makes it hard for him to find sex-titillation in anything short of flogging dead horses. He makes the trip. The father and mother are a sweet old couple. How they have managed to keep going in a world of things as hard and artificial as mortgages and patent manures, that is a mystery to us. It is clear from their brows and general statements that they have never had a malicious thought. They are as uncritical as the dead used to be before we invented such shocking ways of dying. They make the band leader welcome, which is the acid test of character since the trusting Indians stopped bringing out the worst in the white people. But these old folks are so kind they would lay a meal for a sandstorm and take the blame for the mess it caused. He consents to stay with them for a day or two, showing his contempt for their simple ways and looking as if he might consider stealing the farm if the old man would dig it up first. There is also a younger brother on this farm. He is about twelve and by the earnest, admirable look of this young element, we know right off that he is going to play a part in the story. He has a little cough and as soon as we hear this for the first time the whole audience at The Dog rises to attention like a well-trained pack. We know what this means. This kid is going to die. And it will not be a casual, restrained passing, but a shipment of emotion weighted with bales of sorrow at its most cumbersomely banal which will operate on the minds of the audience like a chopper. The boy looks all right now, full of life and spring and the democratic dream as he walks about the farm explaining in simple terms to the band leader about cows. But we have seen this process too often to be taken in. Give these actors six coughs and they can whittle themselves from Grade I to pure ash. The kid will die and he will also redeem the band leader. We have seen this so often we only have to glimpse someone who looks as if he might need redeeming and we are afraid to cough in case we too come in for a dramatic decline. The younger brother is a patriot of the warmest type. As soon as the band leader has understood

about cows, and he does so quickly because the sound of this boy puts him in a mood to be at one with nature, the boy starts on the theme that is dearest to his heart. He tells how America, having sprung miraculously ahead of a corrupt and moronic world, is surrounded by scoundrels and degenerates. Leave America, is this boy's thesis, and the most of what remains on this planet can be scooped away like the brown bruises in fruit. Germans and Japs have currently been at the head of the list but place could also be found for all who would not find themselves immediately at home among the whittling, spitting products who sit around the local store. Feeling like this, the boy longs to be out there (pointing with both arms towards both oceans), with his brother, doing the job. One way and the other, this boy adds a new Star of intensity to the American dream, and we think his lung trouble would be practically cured if he talked less and thought more. But his emotional approach pleases the band leader. After three or four infusions of this simple analysis we see a little ceremony in the kitchen of the farm. The old people, who are looking merrier now since they were told by the bank manager not to worry about the mortgage because he too has a son out there, join the young boy in standing to attention while the band leader plays the national anthem on the oboe. The old people's eyes are glistening with joy and gratitude as if thinking that it is not in many countries you could get out of a mortgage difficulty as easily as that. They all look very solemn as they stand there. Even a large ham hanging from the ceiling seems stiffer and more serious than usual, as if trying to get accustomed to this new attitude on the part of the bank manager. As the last chorus is played, the boy begins to cough. Already a few of the weaker elements in the fivepennies downstairs are beginning to weep. Wilfie has taken his glasses off so that the thing will not become too glaring. In the next scene the tear bath in which our minds are now required to bog down, become soggy, horrible and without function, is turned on full. The boy dies. Every trick of sight and sound is brought forward to have us tamping with grief. And there is always a faction in The Dog which is ready to tamp. It is a pity that such a

decent straightforward thing as death causes such painful confusion in the minds of men. As the boy dies he gives the band leader a message for his brother Joe.

"Tell Joe . . . whatever happens . . . I'll be coming out there . . . doing the job. . . . I'll be seeing him. . . . Tell Joe. . . . Keep on batting out there. . . . There's a job to do. . . ." And he points at both oceans again.

Imagine that with an accompaniment of fine coughing and ten bars on the cello and you will understand why every aisle at The Dog is fitted with a sharply sloping conduit. As the brother's head slumps to one side the old man unfurls a flag in the yard, the band leader takes up his oboe to give us the anthem once again and the less thoughtful spectators in The Dog resolve to go out and do battle under Old Glory although they are paying their current taxes to and receive their official forms from the British Government. From now on the film director's task is simple. He has our minds flat out for jumping on and he does this with Olympic thoroughness with a few hops and skips thrown in. He jumps from such a height he bounces back against the roof with a force that puts him into just the right mental state for making his next picture. But to finish with this one as it is trying to do with us. The stay in the country does wonders for the band leader. He loses that little defect which had puzzled the doctors, collapsed arches or fallen morals, or the old man may have dipped him headfirst into a dewpond to glue back the bits that kept slipping off his skull. We see him in uniform on a small, palm-covered, Jap-filled island. We cannot see the Japs. They are in the tops of trees, hidden, grinning and dropping stuff in the direction of the band leader from time to time. In these films we hardly ever see the Japs away from the treetops. Historians a hundred years from now, relying only on such a film as this one, could reasonably assume that America mobilised her resources to counteract an epidemic of coconuts with teeth. The band leader, now dressed to look like a sergeant, shouts, "Why don't these little brown devils come out and fight like men?" We do not see why. The Japs are doing all right, if not as men then certainly as fruit and they would be unwise to come down and

be peeled by such voters as the band leader. The band leader gets an idea. The grimace he makes leaves us in no doubt of this and makes it obvious that his brain is getting more and more active and that death, danger and the clash of colour are turning the tables on his mental record in this film so far. The top of his head seems to come away like the lid of a teapot, showing us the workings. He picks up a clarinet, apparently thrown by a Jap because we did not see the band leader put it down. He begins to play and a colleague performs on the drums. We have ten minutes of rhythm that has an orgasm and a tilt at reason in every bar. As the music develops we see shots of individual Japanese, dark yellow against dark green and blending better all the time. We see them beginning to smile. All these actors have been chosen for their teeth and they all have very full sets. When they smile the whole body seems to fall away from a white wall of ivory. This is taken as comic and the people in *The Dog* give these grinning Japanese a warm reception. We take a more cautious view and think that the Japanese with these smiles may already be thinking of the way the world will leap sweating from its sleep when it thinks of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and showing their contempt for the band leader and for the loss of imperial grip on the part of his people. One officer sitting in the heart of a bunch of bananas bears this out. He says, 'Amelicans, effete lace of lascals.' But his men without exception are smiling because the rhythm is now getting into their system. It is getting into ours too but we are sitting nearer the ground than the Japs and are being less tickled by the leaves of the plantain so we stay sullen. They like white man's music and we mark this up as another black mark against the Japs. Then they get beyond the smiling stage. They feel the urge to dance as the band leader's touch becomes more magic. One cannot dance in treetops in a wood where homicide has become the one and only programme to the astonishment of the neighbouring polyps. So they do the next best thing. They wriggle in time with the band leader's playing. He reaches a peak of furious fluting and the concealed enemy now wriggle with an intensity that makes the trees sway and must be riddling them with splinters. Once this happens

the swaying palms are demolished and we have a glimpse of the Japanese officer having the fruit shot from beneath him and heading for the ground apologising for his remark about effeteness. For ourselves we did not think that the Japs were wriggling at all to enter more fully into the spirit let loose by the band leader's rhythm. Our bet is that they were trying, as earnestly as men can in such a cramped position and enslaved by the military, to uproot the trees on which they were sitting and belt the band leader with them for letting down even the low minimal standards of decent gravity accepted by all belligerent parties. The film ends with a kind of joke aimed at conciliating those who may even now be on their way up the aisle to shoot Mr. Jaxley and apply for a permanent ticket in the toilet. When the Japs have all been rounded up, and their conduct as it is here being interpreted must make the average cretin of the democratic lands feel like Solon, the band leader, surrounded now by happy comrades who are so busy taking back the perfectly accurate things they said about him before you can hardly see them for dark revocations, dips his clarinet in a lagoon to cool. The lagoon bubbles. We fall in line with the lagoon and do a little bubbling on our own behalf. Talfan, who is back at his position at the head of the stairs again, thinks we are being too churlish and unsuggestible.

"Hot, see?" he says. "Hot music, swing. Dips clarinet into water. Water, cold. Clarinet, hot. Bubbles, see?"

"Have you ever seen such stuff?" asks Spence.

"Yes," says Sammy. "Once a week, in this very Dog, ever since I was tall enough to get money out of my mother and reach up to get a ticket from Beryl in the box."

We get through the main feature which is every bit as grisly as Talfan warned us it would be, a whirl of planless and sensual brutality which has the most saddening effect on us, and which makes Sam Price go up to the office of Mr. Jaxley, the manager, on the way out. Mr. Jaxley asks Sam in a very peremptory way to state his needs.

"I have no needs," says Sam. "But after seeing that last film I wish to tell you that you are nothing better than a crypto-

Spenglerian throw-back, darkening and degrading the wits of the voters with such sadistic items."

Sam gets on to the pavement a millimetre in advance of the boot of Mr. Jaxley who is a man with no place for heavy, pensive talk.

Out on the road in the pale mid-evening light we stare at the rounded hills, our minds tiny, hollow sepulchres.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AUGUST sunlight is brilliant in the small Mynydd Coch square. The Council Chamber façade is shrunken and shabby in the huge richness of light. This is the day on which we set out for that farming camp near Trelom which Mr. Rawlins has organised and which, he has been telling us through the summer term, is going to make men out of us and make the country's war potential grin and look rosy. He has told us that he has already circularised the farmers in the broad lush vale that lies between our hills and the sea, telling them that we are on the way. He has not yet received any reply from these voters, they having been made taciturn and even churlish by their traffic with the soil, but he is confident that they will welcome us and give us the chance to become versatile in this matter of land-labour and to take part in promoting a bumper harvest of everything except profit to ourselves. We are to be paid eightpence an hour and boys like Nick Williams, a bus driver of left-wing notions with whom we often talk in the refreshment shop of Tonio Anselmi, tell us that we are simply being used as an enriching fertiliser for the larger farmers, and that it would be more honest if Mr. Rawlins shovelled us all into buckets and then laid us directly on to the furrow.

We stand about the square, some with knapsacks, some with large suitcases gone lustreless enough for our parents to think they can be left in the country if they fall to pieces in our hands. There is always a melancholy look about people with suitcases in Mynydd Coch for mostly they are associated with the idea of voters being evicted, doing a moonlight flit or marching off to wealthier areas in search of bliss. Time and again people come on to us and tell us how sorry they are that we cannot even remain in the place of our birth and they say, shaking their heads in great sorrow, that they thought the war had put an end to all this lurching from place to place in search of a

firmer grip on life by the prolies. Some other people, with memories of the great protest marches that used to set out to London from Mynydd Coch in the days of chronic shrinkage, think that we too are the beginnings of some new procession which is going to submit some radical demand to the Government, a demand perhaps that it acquire a more loving attitude all round by injecting itself with the whole phial of pity-hormone which we in the course of our fruitless and compassionate years have managed to squeeze from our tired gland. The way in which we are dressed may have something to do with this confusion. Mr. Rawlins told us to bring only our old clothes. He forgot how old clothes can be in Mynydd Coch. We have all drawn a fine dredge through the recess under the stairs where we keep our cast-offs. Life has never sung for us in the key which prompts voters to regard a garment as done with and fit only for the bin. Even with clothes that are literally crumbling in our hands there is a sinister reservation in the mind that we may yet find our current security crumbling even faster, driving us back to the exiled favourites of a generation ago. This phobia for hoarding is still total in my father and Spence's, and Spence and I are both wearing Norfolk jackets that have a strong Edwardian flavour and an unaccountable system of patches. Spence has grey trousers with a whole new seat of navy blue serge let into them. This gives the whole turn-out a morbid and disquieting look, as if Spence is splitting his personality right in front of you. I tell him how sorry I am that his old man in his mania to be patching everything from the plan of the universe down, did not choose a better tint than dark blue which goes poorly with a sporting garment like flannel trousers. Bosworth Bowen is wearing a slouch which makes him look more wearily mature than usual and that noisy young element, Gomer Jones, a paid-up pagan who has the most athletic imagination in Mynydd Coch, is standing near us with his hair clipped down to the bare skin and he is dressed in grey dungarees, looking like a convict.

"How do we travel to this camp, boy?"

"The County Council are very good. They send a lorry and

they deliver us to the gate of the very field where we are to start the harvest."

Around the corner comes Ted Dolan with his father. Ted is wearing a massive overcoat, a cloth cap and he has his trumpet slung around his shoulder. He looks as if he has come to play to Gomer Jones in gaol.

"Don't overdo it, boys," says Mr. Dolan to us. Mr. Dolan, as a Looker who holds a strictly apocalyptic view of this world, takes trouble to remind us that our official address is still Interim Alley, for all the prattle of the materialists. "You're young and I can see you going at this job with real fervour. You'll leave no potato at peace for miles around and you'll get the harvest barns bulging. That's just the sort of sight and moment that will make doom malicious and wishful to get us between the sights for the final clip. So pull lightly at the corn and leave one potato in two for the earth's own plate of chips."

While Mr. Dolan is talking, out of the Council Chamber comes our friend of the Play-Reading Group, Odo Montgomery, dressed as a Home Guard, in a brand-new uniform and the stripes of a corporal. We are delighted to see Odo in this dress because we know he has been breaking his heart for years past after being rejected for the army and kept out of the Home Guard by the Clerk to the Council who thinks it more important that Odo should be on hand to do overtime on such jobs as counting the war savings in Mynydd Coch. We go forward to congratulate him on his now being a soldier and to ask him how he ever persuaded such a disgruntled and fussy voter as the Clerk to release him from his full-time labour in the Finance Department. But we are surprised to see no trace of a smile on Odo's face; normally he is one of the most genial of Mynydd Coch's really serious Christians.

"Look here, Dolan," says Odo to Ted's father. "Like most soldiers I have ears like a fox. I heard what you've just been saying to these boys and although I respect your views as a Looker and see the point of smiling in a friendly and conciliatory way at doom every now and then I think it high time that you stopped being so eccentric and joined up with one of the more hopeful sects. Here are these boys off on a fine job of

harvesting to feed the nation. What do you do? Recommend them to pick only half the potatoes they see. If you had black and yellow stripes and spoke with an American accent I'd know what to call you. And now that I'm in uniform and can be brutally frank I am going to stick the correct label on to most of your views as a Looker; bull."

"Every man to his own dreads," says Mr. Dolan cheerfully and says 'So-long' to us all as he goes off to his job at the Trading Estate.

We ask Odo why he should be dressed up as a Home Guard so early in the morning, knowing how peaceful the work is that he does in the Clerk's office. First of all he gives us a stern suspicious look, the sort we get from Talfan Phelps, the usher down at the Mynydd Coch cinema, when Talfan thinks that we are talking sedition. Talfan smells treason in places where the rest of us just smell Mynydd Coch and he thinks that humanity has worked its way up to the wartime coalition and will now probably stop. We all nod, friendly, at Odo to break him of this tense and unpleasant attitude. When he does speak it is in a low, edged way as if he is convinced that once the news is out of his mouth one of us will go straight off to the Germans.

"We have a week's camp, near Trelom."

"Then we'll be seeing you."

"Oh I don't think so. Intensive training. Battle tactics. Man to man. Make every stroke count. There'll be no time for play there. Oh no!"

He turns his back on us suddenly and he stands quite still. At first we think this is some ceremonial way he has found of showing his contempt for the ununiformed. Then we notice he has a long knife hanging from his belt like a tail. Without another word he goes back into the Council Chamber.

"If I were the Clerk," says Spence, "I'd keep an eye on Odo. That element is working his way up to some kind of blood-lust. It was bound to come. All those years of using nothing but ink and singing songs in a sweet tenor voice down at those concerts they hold at the Tabernacle vestry."

"Don't worry about Odo," says Ted. "That knife's too big for him. If he lifts that, he'll rise with it."

"What's that coat for, Ted? The County Council also provides tents."

"Every man his own tent. That's what the old man says. Don't let it catch you in your shirt if it comes at night, the earth's final twitch, that is. So put on your uncle Sebastian's greatcoat, he said, and wait in comfort."

Ted waits for his father to vanish around the corner of the square, then slips off the coat and lays it on the greenish suitcase which he has brought along. Even Ted looks like a pygmy after shedding so much slough.

"Now I'll go and watch for that lorry," he says and begins climbing up the elaborately decorated pillar which stands to the right of the Council Chamber door. There should be two of these pillars but the slump caught the architect on the thigh and he had to use the blue print to keep the Council partially warm during the years of recession. So we make do with one. After a good look at it on a clear ruthless day, especially the festoon of bearded heads on top which are supposed to represent the kind of dour pietists who made Mynydd Coch what it is and were neither tried nor punished for it, you might think one enough for us to be crawling on with. We can see clerks looking astonished as they see Ted Dolan swinging past them on his way to the roof almost as fast as the average voter would walk along a pavement.

"No sign of a lorry in all Mynydd Coch. I bet the County Council has taken a second look at us and decided against us," shouts Ted down to us.

Then Hugo Bateman, a noted young reciter and actor in the middle school, comes running around the square and says that Mr. Rawlins and Wilf are approaching and forming part of one of the strangest processions or tableaux ever seen in Mynydd Coch. Normally we never believe Hugo Bateman, for reciting and reading from the Scriptures to such gatherings as the Religious Sisterhoods seem to have driven him, as far as the truth is concerned, off the hinge. But we crowd down to the corner around which Hugo has just come.

Along the road, surrounded by a thin cloud of voters all anxious to know at what angle the zeitgeist is now flicking its

armoured tail, come a horse and cart. Leading the horse and looking as if he has already written off part of his arm and applied to the Medical Aid Scheme for a new one, is Wilf. He is standing well back and staring at the surrounding roof tops, embarrassed and furtive. Just behind him is Mr. Rawlins. He is dressed in a new tweed suit, fawn in colour and perfect to our eyes save in that it seems to sit a little too tightly around his body, for all the world as if it cannot have too much of Mr. Rawlins. He is also wearing a tweed hat of light green which is causing as much of a stir among the voters as the sight of two such tidy-looking elements as he and Wilf forming part of such a turn-out. The average run of boy associated with horses and carts in Mynydd Coch is as rough to look at as we are when dressed up for a farming camp. There was that Ruben Sinfield the Satyr, as coarse a voter as this division will ever produce unless we get an import licence for the special raw material we would need for the job of getting back to Piltdown. This Sinfield was the owner of a horse and cart which he used as part of a cockle and mussel traffic. The voters here do not seem keen on mussels and cockles, being quite harassed enough to extract a little sense out of life without being driven a few miles nearer the County Mental trying to get the body out of shellfish. But Sinfield the Satyr, as his name shows, was fond of approaching women on a basis of swift and even alarming frankness and going around the streets exchanging rough jokes and so on with housewives, boldly and from the early hours of the morning onwards; a big improvement on the old method of waiting until nightfall and sidling up with stealth. Sinfield reached his peak about two months ago. He had a cart-load of cockles. A housewife, who had long been a willing vessel for Sinfield's jests and antics, complained that they looked very stale. Ruben clambered from his driving seat, stood majestically astride the heap of shellfish and said in his most unmoral voice, looking exactly as Silenus would have done if that element had taken to the cockle trade after ten years in a narrow seam pit: 'Freshen them, you say? Freshen them?' And the rest of his response was so basic and complete that Sinfield is still in the County Keep, our main

gaol, on a charge of blending vulgarity with paganism in a way that cannot be tolerated in a place that had its big religious revival two centuries ago. His cart was sold. Ted Dolan, who has now edged his way into the crowd, says that this cart is the very one that Sinfield used and this we think accounts for the presence around it of the dozen or so women and kids who are screeching with laughter and making lubricious remarks about Sinfield's action. They seem to think that Mr. Rawlins, with proper encouragement, might be expected to take up where Sinfield left off.

Mr. Rawlins blushes and tries to brush these people away, saying how surprised he is that in the very middle of a war for Christian values these voters should have nothing better to do than to go marching about Mynydd Coch exposing the case-ments of filth in their minds.

"He's waiting for a fresh load of cockles," says one broad woman, "then he'll do it."

A great red curtain of laughter rolls over the group and Mr. Rawlins now looks as if he is quite willing to join Wilf in a quiet faint.

"It wouldn't be worth waiting for," says another. "Just look at him. Not a patch on Sinfield, not even in that hat."

Mr. Rawlins rolls up his green hat and thrusts it into his pocket. He frowns at the back of Wilf's head and tries to distract attention from himself by shouting to Wilf to come nearer to the horse, to be at ease, and he repeats that axiom about the horse being man's best friend. Wilf, who is recalling a hundred instances from the past of calamity following like a tail at the end of some similar assurance from Mr. Rawlins, gets as far away from the horse as the bridle will let him. Mr. Rawlins keeps on talking. He is explaining to Wilf that animals attack men not because men are odious to them but because fear causes certain secretions to occur in humans that sicken and disquiet animals and drive them to assault us, not through hatred, but panic. We can almost hear Wilf secreting at that moment and we have never seen a horse look so sickened. But its sickness is absolute and ripens into no other sort of assertion.

The cavalcade moves towards the middle of the square. The followers break up and return to their homes, convinced now that Mr. Rawlins is not part of a public protest organised by that small anti-Calvinist group, the Mynydd Coch Revisionists, to get Sinfield out of gaol. We notice that there are marks of elegance about the horse that Wilf is leading which hoist it far above the normal level of spickiness for these animals. Its mane is done up in a multitude of coloured ribbons and around its neck is a chain of brass medallions which are shining like new pennies.

"That's Blossom. That horse is Blossom," says Gomer Jones, pushing his puzzled face between my face and Spence's. "What's all this for? Why should Rawlins and Wilf be in the carting business? Why the finery on Blossom? Why should Rawlins and the horse look so much like toffee-apples?"

Before we can answer, the front doorway of the Council Chamber fills suddenly with influential-looking voters who must clearly have been waiting for Rawlins and the cart to come into view to file into position. Most of these people are Councillors and we can see Mr. Harry Carewis wearing a chain not unlike that worn by Blossom but not as shiny or decorative. At Mr. Carewis' side is Mr. Joby Short, a fat man who does a thriving trade in greengroceries.

Mr. Rawlins waves us all to silence. Mr. Carewis explains how we boys are going to help with the harvest. He gives a short bow to Mr. Rawlins and Mr. Rawlins gives one back and Gomer Jones says it's a fine thing that we should be stuck there on a fine Saturday morning watching these heavy-footed elements carrying on like a pack of Japs. Mr. Carewis then mentions that Mr. Joby Short has been kind enough to lend a horse and cart to the farming-party to help them with transportation and also to give us a chance to get to know animals better, the horse being man's best friend. Mr. Rawlins and Wilf begin to clap and we, with slower fingers, follow suit. Then Joby Short takes up the word. We have never come across this voter in the role of orator before and we listen well. He has a face like a comedian, a husky voice and a store of jests that are well to the South of the bawdy. That very pure-

mindful voter who claims to have the most spotless conscience in all Mynydd Coch, Ceredig Rowe the Driven Snow, husband to that other illuminated element, Jennifer Rowe the Glow, once went to work on one of Joby's carts and his hair went white in the course of the few dialogues he had with Joby. He got to a point where he always carried a flask of iodine with a perforated cap to sprinkle over each fresh anecdote as it came forth and keep the air transparent.

Joby gives a husky guffaw before he says a word to show that he is a toy, a buffoon as well as a greengrocer, as at home with the secrets of man's absurdity as he is with sprouts. He says he is glad to see us all so healthy and neat. He winks at Wilf as he says this. Wilf blinks and looks down at his buttons. Joby says he is delighted to be linked in any way with a farming expedition because we know only too well the many connections he has had with the land. He leans forward gravely, his eyes half-closed, his red skin darkening with amusement. We lean forward too because we know from Joby's look that that last remark was not as simple as it sounds. Yes, he says, many connections with the land. Thirty years in the vegetable business and a full quota of dead relations in the Black Meadow. He guffaws again. Gomer Jones laughs and Ted Dolan smiles; these two boys have very much the same savage Tartar approach to fun as Joby. But behind Joby, Mr. Carewis, Leo Warburton's father, the Clerk and Odo look startled at one another and the Clerk and Odo are both counting on their fingers as if calculating there and then how long a penny rate would take to net them enough to get rid of Joby. Joby grows more serious. He tells us of the days of service we will have out there in the fields. When filling the potato sacks, he says, we will see many with his name on.

"And when you come to those, don't forget that you are Mynydd Coch boys first and harvesters second. Stick by Joby and Joby'll stick by you. Stick by Blossom and Blossom'll stick by you. The same goes for that cart. Three cheers for your fine leader, Mr. Rawlins."

Odo leads the cheers, in a voice so high it makes us all think of that long knife he has hanging down at the back.

Mr. Warburton winds up. He says that Trelom is going to be a significant centre for some days to come. Not only will it see us boys harvesting and filling the people's bag but a large part of Mynydd Coch's Home Guard will be there as well, hardening themselves for the day of trial. Odo tilts his chin up, his features pale and pure as those of a dedicated knight.

The Councillors go back into the building. We all crowd around Mr. Rawlins wanting to know what part Blossom and Sinfield's cart are going to play in our affairs.

"You told us a lorry was coming," says Spence, "a lorry from the Agricultural Committee."

"We've seen some of those lorries. They're a treat," says Ted. He flips the side of the cart contemptuously with his hand. "What is this article for?"

Mr. Rawlins looks bitterly at Ted and Spence.

"I expected that from you two. Don't you oafs ever think of anything but doing things in the easiest possible manner. Listen, all of you!" He stretches his arm westward. "We are going out there, to the fields, to the open country. The decadent commercialism of towns is to be left behind. This is a kind of rebirth. You've heard of the slow rhythm of satisfaction in a peasant's life, haven't you?"

Gomer Jones who has gone beyond the need to mask his ignorance says no. This, to him, he says, is a new topic.

"Never mind," says Mr. Rawlins. "There is such a thing. I knew it as a boy on my grandfather's farm. We are going to recapture it. Some of you boys are going to feel the vulgarity flake off you. What kind of jarring note do you think a recking lorry would have introduced into our enterprise on our very first morning. Trelom is a mere six miles away. We are going there by way of the old Roman track over the hill to the West, Prophet's Peak."

"But there won't be room for us all on Sinfield's cart," says Gomer. "And in any case, if we did manage to perch on it that road over Prophet's Peak is stony and steep. We'd be jolted off."

Mr. Rawlins looks disgustedly at Gomer and pulls his tweed hat slowly out of his pocket to give him time to think of something that will drive Gomer through the asphalt like a nail.

"Jones," he says, his green hat bunched insecurely at the top of his head, giving him the look of an anxious gnome, "the motto of this expedition is going to be 'Peasant Calm', and if that calm is going to be shattered by any chatter of yours, out you go. No one is going to ride on the cart. The cart is for baggage and equipment, as it would have been for those Romans who first drove that road over the Peak. We shall walk alongside and behind, getting our bodies used to the new rhythm of physical labour."

Into the square a fair number of voters dressed up as Home Guards are now making their way. There is nothing arrogant or really military about their bearing and they all have something of the appearance of amateur actors. Mynydd Coch has a long tradition of pacifism associated with the radical libertarian line it has taken in politics and if they do manage to get war taken in as an enduring and valid part of the world's economy, we can see Mynydd Coch either contracting out or wearing a very strained look on its face.

Mr. Heywood Mathews, who is known for the large amount of land and money he has managed to accumulate over the years as Mathews the Moloch, is about the only really dynamic element in the whole turn-out. He is dressed as a superior officer with a moustache that has put on a good inch at each side since the beginning of the war. With this extra hair he now looks very like that man in the cigarette advertisement who is meant to look like a born ruler and to persuade the proles that they are on to a good thing with his brand and that if they inhale deeply enough to achieve stupor, items like slumps and rickets will fall into a more tolerable pattern. Mr. Mathews is shouting out orders and telling his men to spruce up. Mr. Mathews owns three mountains, the intervening fields and has connections also with the coal and brewery trades which are good things to be on the selling side of, with cold and thirst trailing like a pair of hungry twins at the shirt tails of most voters. We can understand why his moustaches bristle so at the sight of slovenliness among his subordinates, why his voice mounts in command to a point where he seems to be going off into that fine tenor song 'Sound an Alarm'. With that much to

defend even we would be fussy about organising the voters into solid ranks to keep foes at bay.

Many of the Home Guards are known to us. There is Nick Williams, the bus driver. Our friend Sammy Price, who has just joined us with a colossal haversack on his back and a worn-out look on his small analytical face, tells Nick he is surprised to see him and his companions in the role of janisaries in the army of Mathews the Moloch. Nick says it is a good way of getting a week off from his job as driver of a bus in the transport company operated by Mr. Warburton, a fleet of buses known for their colour and the roaring racket they make as The Yellow Dragons.

We see Wilf's uncle Tude. His uniform is hanging away from him as if it has heard that Uncle Tude has only half enlisted, having decided to read a full list of war aims before trying to fill the thing out. He has exactly the same look of listening terror which is spread like a trade mark over Wilf. Fear has taken furnished rooms with this element, paying only a small controlled rent. He seems to be shrinking away from the heavy rifle on his shoulder. We are astonished to see him as he comes furtively on to the square in the company of one of the broadest and most backward elements in this division, Denzil Dummock. We have often recommended Mr. Rawlins to enlarge his horizon as a biologist by running his hand over Denzil's frame, because if this man is not utterly unevolved and still carrying around bits of apparatus that should properly have been left behind at Cro-Magnon, then we live in a happy age. But Mr. Rawlins has made no approach to Denzil. It is not only your horizon that would be enlarged if you ran your hand over this man in search of a tail or anything else, even with a certificate from the Ministry of Education entitling you to become a searcher in any and every context. Denzil was once a weight-lifter and kept on lifting weights and giving other voters hernias with the mere sight of some of the huge loads that he kept whirling, until he got married and had a kitchenful of children with several small ones out in the greenhouse for forcing. For as long as we have known him he has been a fanatical patriot, always in favour of marching forward

as one of an armed national group lambasting the non-Britisher whether they see any point in it or not. Uncle Tude is glancing at Denzil covertly and seems to be estimating his chances of slipping away and getting into quieter and more pensive company. The last time we saw these two together was on the last night of Mynydd Coch's Savings Week. Tude, who is a worker with the Council, was the voter on duty that night to haul down the gigantic flag on the square. Mynydd Coch has had little to do with flags and Uncle Tude sums up all its ignorance about how to hoist them up and haul them down. Tude was there pulling at the cords for about half an hour, with the voters who had never heard about the rule that flags come down at sunset, asking him why he should be so concerned and, with the Council so niggardly about overtime, to take it easy as dusk came down. Denzil was there as well, stupefiedly drunk after a long day at the Mynydd Coch Non-Political Club where scientists sometimes go for samples of purely thoughtless air. Denzil stood staring at the flag, hand to forehead, giving what was without question the longest salute since Kipling. Then he noticed Uncle Tude fiddling about at the base of the flag pole and getting into trouble with the cords. He had sometimes heard Tude at the Non-Political uttering views in favour of steadier work and surer foundations of amity among the nations which at the time had made Tude sound like Lenin to the ears of Denzil. So Denzil imagined that Tude was out to steal and dishonour the national emblem and around the town he chased Tude, the latter whining like a jet engine with terror and attracting a lot of attention from the Air Cadets. The two of them were a nuisance when their route took them through the main square where couples were trying to dance to the music of a band led by our friend Benny Turner, who was wearing a bow tie and looking so orgiastic as he swayed over his rhythm that the Clerk to the Council complained and quietly asked Benny what exactly lay behind the look he wore during the faster numbers. It is clear as we watch Denzil grinning amiably at Tude that he has now forgotten the incident of the flag. But for Uncle Tude there can be no forgetting. In a life so full of apprehensive echoes that

even his birth never seems more than an hour old, that agonising chase through the central streets of Mynydd Coch, with the false but fierce teeth of a demented chauvinist not a yard from his frail seat, is not likely to recede in haste from his plane of current dreads.

Two lorries come into the square. The Home Guards are piling themselves and their equipment under the green tarpaulin. When they are all inside the outer layer of men is jammed tightly against the wooden flap which has now been raised and pinned into position. Our hope that there might have been room for us to press in and have a quick ride to Trelom has vanished. Odo, with a sheath of papers in his hand, gets in beside one of the drivers. We can see that Odo is a key man on the administrative side of this expedition, for on those sheets of paper he has enough figures to provide a statistical digest of the whole war. Mr. Rawlins is telling Wilf that he thinks that the appearance of some of the men is sloppy in the extreme and a reflection on British arms. He says that Mynydd Coch could do with an injection of the spirit of Omdurman, a battle where we made the coloured folk quail as a change from doing most of the heavy work. Mr. Mathews the Moloch, says Mr. Rawlins, will no doubt be at pains to knock a bit more shape into these shambling misfits once he gets them out of earshot of Mynydd Coch, where their screams of protest would probably bring those nosey rodneys from the Council of Civil Liberties running with their pencils wetted and ready to indict. As Mr. Rawlins is speaking in this bitter way he is staring directly at Uncle Tude, who is forming part of the outer layer in one of the lorries. Wilf nods and edges towards the lorry and whispers something to Uncle Tude about sprucing up and looking more military. Uncle Tude says in his soft, reasonable voice that with about forty voters pressing against him from inside the lorry he is lucky to be upright at all, let alone spruce, and he will count himself luckier still if, when they reach Trelom, he will not be travelling with only his legs inside the vehicle as a concession to Mathews, and his head bumping on the ground. Denzil who is standing just behind Tude gives a sudden laugh and tells

Wilf not to worry about his uncle, says that he will keep an eye on him, make a man of him and gives Tude a blow of encouragement which almost puts him over the flap and makes us expect to see Tude's rifle which was at the back appear at the front by the direct route. Then Denzil's eyes fall upon Sammy Price who has come up to have a few words with some voters from his street who are in the lorry. Denzil's face changes on the instant. The drooping mouth, shaped by years of sensual and mindless enjoyment, seasoned by rounds of deafening laughter, closes with a disquieting completeness. The whole face of Denzil Dummock, which we young elements have always regarded as Mynydd Coch's most advanced achievement in the line of total blankness and mental sleep, looks racked by the sort of tormented intelligence and fear which we have grown to accept as part of the furniture in such over-thoughtful places as the Library and Institute. For years we regarded that expression as the cause of the heavy oniony smell which hangs like a purple veil over all the rooms of that building but it is due, we have now been told by Odo who has read the minutes of the Council meeting called to discuss this very smell, to a combination of dampness in the woodwork and the large number of books on the shelves that have no link with the living world. We turn to ask Sam why the sight of him should cause this transformation in Denzil, why the sight of anyone, even on so fine and promising a morning of summer, should suddenly cause Denzil to look like a scholarship holder, the very top of our tortured class, prize medallist of our gripesome group. But Sam, as we can see even from the small patch of skin around his ears which is all that we can see of him as he walks away, is not disposed to answer questions and has made his way towards the horse and cart. I tell Spence that when we get to Trelom we shall see Nick Williams who turns up a steady and reliable wick on even the darkest recesses of life in Mynydd Coch and ask him what link there can possibly be between an uncertificated ape like Denzil and an element like Sam.

Mr. Rawlins is now going from group to group telling us to marshal ourselves. There are many, especially the younger

ones, who still believe that the business of cancelling the lorry and falling in behind Blossom is a joke on Mr. Rawlins' part, a thin one but, by the average standard of Mr. Rawlins, never a Charlie Chaplin even with the life force giving full and active suck to his attempts at jesting, fair and tolerable, good enough to set the whole enterprise off on a smiling foot. Such boys as Gomer Jones who have never failed to regard Mr. Rawlins with his strange mercurial antics as frankly elfin and supernatural are now confidently saying that, with the grey discipline of school behind us the whole period at the camp is going to be lived against this same rich backcloth of buffoonery which we have already seen in the matter of Sinfield's cart. Gomer and his group puzzle Mr. Rawlins by going to stand near Blossom and laughing right up from the belly and winking at Mr. Rawlins as if to show him that they now see the point of the joke and will he now hand the props back to Joby Short and bring on the lorry and get on with the farming. He cuffs Gomer who is the leading laughter and starts seizing several knapsacks and loading them on to the cart where there is already a basket of crockery and cutlery borrowed from the school. We watch Mr. Rawlins' face. It is full of uneasy confused thoughts. It is clear that his notion of the cart and horse does not seem as bright to him now as it did when he first conceived it. But this only makes him the more resolved to step up the tempo of his activity to a pitch where no one will observe the onrush of his doubt, the toothprint of his mordant reservations, and so great is his haste to get hold of the knapsacks and throw them on to the cart that some small elements, slow to get their straps undone and themselves out of range, are themselves hoisted on to the cart and we see their terrified faces peeping out from between the gaps in the mounting heap of leather and canvas.

The lorries are preparing to leave. We notice the faces of some of the older soldiers. They are lighting up, becoming more boisterous and resolved to relax and reflower as soon as the lorries get them out of eyeshot of their wives and neighbours. We pick out in the half gloom of the lorry's interior several voters who normally go about Mynydd Coch with

faces like eviction notices, now looking licentious and gay and if it were not for Mr. Rawlins' strategy in dipping us direct into the healing fluid of pre-industrial techniques and facing us with the prospect of a seven-mile walk under a hot and rising sun we would be delighted to note this change, to recommend that within commonsense limits it become institutional. The lorries pull out. Odo leans out of the front window of the second one and gives a fine salute to Mathews the Moloch who is standing stiff as death and acknowledging any salutes that may be going at the side of a large blue car.

We, behind Blossom and the cart, with Wilf still holding the headstall and refusing to believe any of the good things ever said about horses, file out of the square.

"Peasant Calm," mutters Bosworth Bowen. "What kind of graveyard notion is that?"

Mr. Rawlins who is moving swiftly up and down the column looking for something on which to pin a poultice of diversionary disgust, hears Bosworth, gives him a quick push and tells him to concentrate on enjoying the dry healthy air and to flex his muscles for the coming act of harvest.

We begin the climb over Prophet's Peak. The sun is finding us more and more easily. Mrs. Monroe, our history teacher, has told us that this mountain path, leaping straight as an arrow from the mountain's base to its very summit, is one of the finest gestures of contempt ever made by the Romans at a mountain or at the elements who failed to defend it against the onrush of plundering hooligans. As we slip about on its stones we feel for sure that the road must have ravelled greatly during the centuries. If the Romans had had one tithe of our trouble they would have gone straight back to Rome and asked for a transfer and an end to empire.

We are now at the head of the procession and patting Blossom and even caressing its teeth to show that any malignancy this horse might have felt against man for trapping it into the service of such uncouth voters as Joby Short has long since given up the ghost. Mr. Rawlins is at our side, his head bare, letting the sun laugh right into his thinning hair. He says no word to us but his panting grows more emphatic.

We can hear him mutter as he throws a black glance at us and the horse that for him nothing ever quite comes off.

"The gesture, the gesture," we hear him say, with the soft bitterness you would expect to hear from a vocal ghost. "Where is the gesture that will really plug in and make the kind of music we want to hear?"

We feel sorry for him as he goes off into these rounds of tragic muttering and we all tell him in our different ways that it would not have been as satisfying to have been taken off to camp by any other means or route. We all look disgusted as we tell him of the way those Home Guards went off, packed like cattle and looking bilious under those green tarpaulins.

"Up here," says Spence, "the lungs live for a change and the mind gets clean."

Mr. Rawlins is overjoyed to hear us say things like these and he is just on the point of making some affable conversation and of putting on his hat to show that he is not even worried about thinning hair any more, and he has always regarded this fact of thinning as very bleak, when we hear a kind of jungle cry from Gomer Jones. Wilf jumps as if Blossom has now got him into focus and left her teeth in him. Mr. Rawlins tears back to deal finally with Gomer. As he runs back down the path we can hear him shout that it was a cloudy day for us all when Gomer Jones ever heard of the farming camp. He is about to fetch Gomer one that will land him back in the middle of Mynydd Coch square when Gomer says:

"But look at the cart."

Mr. Rawlins stops in the middle of his striking stance, one leg and one arm raised. We notice that in response to the steepening slope the whole load of coats, bags and the basket of crockery have been edging towards the cart's lip. One more jolt and Blossom would have found the going much easier. A rush of boys begins and the baggage is held in position by a dyke of campers. Mr. Rawlins does not praise Gomer for having raised the alarm, nor does he apologise to Gomer for having come so near to having Gomer start off the three weeks headless; he gives him a look that says that Gomer for the last ten minutes has without doubt been extending the evil magic

of his eyes to the full and joggling the crockery of the cart by the sheer power of his impish suggestion. We have to hand it to Mr. Rawlins and Gomer. They see a greater stretch of pure nightmare, strongly lit perspectives of baleful promise, in each other than any other human duo on earth.

We reach the small flat summit of Prophet's Peak. We lead Blossom on to a fine patch of tall grass. We throw ourselves down, our backs resting against the cool soft knolls that abound on our hills and we watch the enchantment of mountain and heat-haze all around. North to the Black Mountains; South across the sea to Somerset and Devon. Spence was right. We can feel our minds peel off the grime and staleness. We are singing our gladness at being up here, on this tall mountain that has the changeless serenity of a flawless thought. Most of us have packages of sandwiches or sweets and we munch at about the same speed as Blossom. We think of the mountain's name. We are reminded of it by the sight of Mr. Rawlins standing apart from us and staring out over the hill ranges, tensely and sadly, as if their pattern has yielded up to him their fundamental poignant meaning at last. The mountain has had its name for ages past and who that prophet might have been not even that acute sexton of spent years, our history teacher, can tell us. It could have been any one of a million well-qualified elements in this division, for since man in these valleys first started to get wet, overworked and generally fretted, visions of future reckoning and bliss have been launched forward on a spearhead of dynamic longing. Once, in the Library and Institute, some eccentric old brooder told us that the prophet who gave his name to the peak was an element who climbed to the top and formulated prophecies that in the years to come all was going to be far less than well with Mynydd Coch. On the very next day after our being told this, the boys in the Discussion Group at the Institute, Nick Williams and his friends, made a sardonic pilgrimage to the peak and assured the ghost of the prophet that he had put his dart right in the bull and that if he was now putting some kind of spell on the place to make sure that his words should come true, to stop it. From us at least he had full marks and

would he now uncork a fresh cycle of fresh visions to convince man that the time was ripe to hang his current relationships out to dry and acquire a fresher smell.

Mr. Rawlins mobilises us once more. From the Western edge of Prophet's Peak we see the broad plain that spreads westward to the Channel. The plain is gently patterned with hedge and tree. Below, in its small perfect valley, is the village of Trelom, quaintly neat and clean to our eyes after the leper's patch of Mynydd Coch. And beyond Trelom, the larger community of Dintle, growing fast along with the aerodrome which has eaten the heart out of the vale; we see the barracks and concrete acres stretch for miles beyond Dintle, a cold disquieting pox on the handsome green.

Mr. Rawlins points to a half-dozen bell tents which have already been planted on the north side of Trelom in readiness for us. He praises the diligence of the advance party, Wally Wedmore, Benny Turner and some others who have been there since early morning establishing the site.

CHAPTER IX

FROM THE start we are at ease in Trelom. The tensions and menaces implicit in so varicose and maimed a place as Mynydd Coch are absent here. Trelom is small to us for we still find it hard to associate the scattered houses on the hillside with an integrated community.

We do our eating and assembling in the village hall. Our tents are in a field alongside. The field is damp and so is the hall. The yellow distempered walls have some of the finest patches of peeled surface we have ever seen. The parts that have not yet been peeled white are blistered and the walls have the effect of holding their breath to dodge having too much of a headful of the sighing staleness which the whole place seems to exude. If we stare at the patches for long enough we can conjure them into the most horrifying patterns and Wilf is convinced that the central patch which is opposite the place where he sits to eat has the features of a corrupt and lecherous man, in the style of Dorian Gray's portrait after Dorian has unloaded on to it the black and scaly fruits of a half-century's sinning.

Our eating is done on trestle tables which in the evening are used for ping-pong and card-playing. The hall appears to serve Trelom in a number of ways. It has a piano in the bowels of which we have found even stranger and more repellent things than we would find in our own, and a low stage with a curtain on which amateur shows are put on in the winter. Gomer Jones has already had a shilling docked from his pay for wiping his hands thoughtlessly on this curtain after leaving the table. Gomer is not really guilty of discourtesy. This element has the eating method of an anaconda and when he gets up from the table, he is so glazed about the eyes and so stupid about the brain, curtain, wall, the hair or shirt of a neighbour are all the same to him.

Hanging from a beam in the high ceiling are two ropes with

metal rings which seem to have been used by some physical training group. One of our younger boys, Wynford Wilkie, a keen athlete and lithe as a monkey in going up and down ropes and swinging, is eager to make himself a nuisance with these ropes. As soon as the vicar, a genial and sleepy man who seems to be brooding over the village hall most of the day, told Mr. Rawlins about these ringed ropes and the trouble the village has had with voters getting giddy in mid air, losing their grip and getting embedded in the roof, Mr. Rawlins called us together, got up on the stage and made a speech. If he had said straight off that any boy found fooling about with those ropes would land up with one of the metal rings threaded through his nose, the whole matter would have been clear and even boys like Wynford Wilkie and Gomer Jones who have put most of their growing into arms and legs would have got the point and passed the things by. But that is not Mr. Rawlins' way. A brief decisive mark on the ground is not enough for him. He must plough, and that deeply. He started off with a parable that he saw the point of exercise, that it was a glorious thing, that the country especially in its present hour would be in a pretty pass without it, that he was for it through thick and thin. But there was a time and a place for it. And our time and place would be in the fields helping the farmers and bringing the harvest home. If we did our duty as harvesters properly there would be no need for exercise of any other sort when we crawled home for tea. Therefore there could be no reason at all for any boy wanting to pull down those ropes and swing from one end of the hall to the other. Although, he said, there was a simian streak in some of us wide enough to have us crowding to do this. But by the time he had got to this finale about the ropes the very boys who needed the caution had gone off to Dintle for chips and lemonade or to the tents to sleep.

It is on the second night that Wynford Wilkie discovers the ropes. The hall is very quiet. Mr. Rawlins has given up his round of popular songs which he has been playing on the piano to keep us merry and wholesome and he has gone off to his bunk with a book on the chemistry of the soil over the reading

of which he smiles broadly from time to time to show us that he at least needs nothing gross to keep amused. Wilf and Bosworth Bowen have been staring at those gigantic wall-portraits and talking about decay in general terms. To take their minds off this we draw a card-table into the very middle of the hall and place on it a chessboard and chessmen, knowing that after an hour of this game even Wilf's mind floods with a healing quietude. The chess game begins and while waiting for Bosworth, an unnaturally slow performer in all things, to make a move, I notice a movement half-way up one of the walls. I decide not to mention this to Wilf or he will swear the dark moving object is one of Dorian Gray's eyes frowning at us and wondering by what right we have come to disturb his tenancy and defile the integrity of his foulness. Then I see the object is Wynford Wilkie, lodged in some kind of niche about twelve feet above the floor and taking orders from Gomer Jones, as unpromising a tableau as one can imagine. Gomer is directing Wynford to the spot on one of the beams where the ringed ropes have been stabled for safety. I try not to think of this scene with its sinister prospect and become absorbed in Bosworth Bowen's craftiness. Then I hear a brief jingle and Wynford comes through the air at a speed only a breath less than that of sound. I manage to duck, having had all my senses more or less on tip-toe ever since I saw Wynford up in the niche, but Wilf, Bosworth and the chessmen go to every corner of the room. Wynford lands in the angle just behind the piano and smiles as if in readiness to be praised for his fine swing. But even as he comes strutting around one side of the piano, Mr. Rawlins comes creeping around the other and fetches Wynford one across the head from behind with 'Chemistry of the Soil' that sends Wynford back to his starting point as fast as he came, but nearer the ground. We see Gomer rush up to Wynford and start massaging the back of his head as if coaxing the life back up to the north of Wynford's neck. The ropes are tied up once more. But we know that Gomer and Wynford, as surely as all life cools, will ripen towards the moment when the ropes will once again be released and themselves hurled through some swift arc of mischief as on this

night. Wilf knows this. He nods in an almost complacent way at Wynford and Gomer when they pass him as if to say that they are now free to do as they please because he and Bosworth have now rigged up a table in a small recess in the ante-room which serves as part of the kitchen. They sit for hours in this cubby-hole immobilised by earnestness and thought, for all the world like the central figures in one of those wall-burials which were popular with the voters years since.

We eat royally. Our cooks from school, Mrs. Willis, Alice Maude and Jennie, have come down to take charge of this department. We are glad of this because these ladies know of old the way we have with food. The Government allows us double rations for as long as we are at the camp because we are no longer regarded as scholars and starvable. In some camps we learn that the boys are less lucky, that the cooks there are sly volunteers who come along for a round of quiet looting which leaves the campers so short of food they are seen to nibble directly at the raw produce they pick from the ground such as swedes and turnips and many of them grow torpid with inward stoppage as they strip the hedges of unripe nuts to fill the gap.

The stoves are vast cast-iron contrivances, placed in the open along the wall that divides us from the Trelom churchyard. Mrs. Willis and her friends have now lost all their dread of that electrified equipment in the school canteen and throw the switches with even greater relish than those mad scientists we see on the screen of our cinema, *The Dog*, petrifying the voters with deathly rays. Therefore, the cooks looked upon the heavy exposed stoves with contempt when they arrived but after a few days they grew quite sentimental about them and we can almost see their minds curling up anew in the nineteenth century and damning in their every conversation the unspiritual aridity of the modern world. But the rain created some trouble at the beginning. Trelom is a real catchment area for wetness, a place where fine weather seems to come only when it stumbles briefly on its way to somewhere else, and the raindrops kept splashing up into the cooks' faces as soon as the stove tops were heated to the full. A protection had

to be devised. Six long sheets of zinc were found, intended originally to fashion a special latrine for the shy and shrinking but rejected when it was found that nobody shrank. A three-sided shelter was erected around each stove. Mr. Rawlins and Wilf who hoisted these sombre-looking canopies into place were very proud of their improvisations until a tricksome wind licking in around the lane brought one of the zincs crashing down and nearly crowned Mrs. Willis as she was half-way through the gravy. Since then Mr. Rawlins has appointed what he calls a wind steward and this was a term that caused a bit of wonder at first, especially when voiced in the short-tempered, accusing way that is habitual to Mr. Rawlins. This element, the wind steward, sits outside the village hall on the high wall that bounds it on the northern side. He keeps raised a wetted finger and when he considers the wind current strong enough to disarrange the zincs he gives warning and a group run forward to station themselves around the stoves and keep the zincs from toppling. But Mr. Rawlins is not easy about it. Every time he hears the shrill cry of the wind steward he walks with slow gravity from the hall followed by Wilf who moves to the same rhythm, as if both of them are convinced that outside they will surely find Mrs. Willis, Alice Maude and Jennie sliced like chips.

On the other side of the lane is a house larger and more serene than any we have seen to date. It is not as large as the County Keep where they put voters for crime, nor as glossy as that new toilet in the Mynydd Coch square, but as a house it queens it over any sample shown to us so far. It has many rooms, twenty we should say from the outside. The gardens are beautifully kept, the maze of hedges more immaculately and smoothly trimmed than Benny Turner's hair. In the flower beds the colours sing in notes of infallibly harmonious density and boldness. The whole house is surrounded by a tall and haughty wall, old and mellow, suggestive to us for some reason of grapes. Its occupants are two people who have the look of scrupulously enclosed and pampered things. They are called Mr. and Mrs. Langtrip. Villagers tell us, in a tone which shows that their spirits have danced a sarabande around

this fact for ages past, that a Langtrip has always been in the large house since the days of Cromwell when a Langtrip held together the cause of King Charles in this area and defied the Roundheads to do their worst, which, when they got sick of Langtrip, they did. We are also told that it is a great sorrow to this present Langtrip that he has no heir, for family pride is strong in these products of a long ancestry and it is like a long needle in his heart, they tell us, that he has no son to inherit the traditions, hedges, airily gracious rooms of the manor. We, with our immediate background of two rooms up, two down, subsidence which often lands us with four down and none up, leaky and shifting roofs and a toilet so far up the garden it slips the mind, see the point of Mr. Langtrip's sorrow, the long needle of regret which stitches a grey hood for the mind. We see a single greenhouse at the back of his house for which, with a few less windows and plants, we would gladly settle, with or without issue.

Mr. Langtrip himself is always dressed in suits of fawn or grey tweed, so strong in texture it makes us think that the chain-mail tradition must still be strong among our ruling groups. His wife is clothed in tweeds too, but hers cling better to the shape. She seems younger than he but they both walk about the village with the same kindly but thoroughly detached air, as if the whole life surrounding them has grown out of them, is due to them, is reliant utterly upon them. Mrs. Langtrip looks livelier than her husband but she too speaks with a drawl that hypnotises any ear used to the staccato, restless speech of Mynydd Coch and after a dozen sentences she can send the average mind into a snoring doze. Mr. Rawlins is captivated by her and as soon as she cares to secure him with rope he will turn out to be the year's widest-eyed and most obedient heifer as far as she is concerned. As soon as she mentioned that their bailiff would be delighted to have all the food waste we could produce for swill we have heard him caution boys like Gomer Jones that their chances of a fit out in the fields will be lessened if they leave a spoonful of food on the plate now and then. Think of the other pigs, he said sportively to Gomer, winking at us and bidding us share in the broad sweep of his humour. When

he saw that Gomer and his friends just kept up their sullen action on the plates and refused to be drawn, he sent Wilf around to them to explain the joke. There are three great bins for food refuse at the bottom of the enclosure and as soon as the bottom of one of them is covered Mr. Rawlins calls out the roster of waste-stewards and these elements, looking serf-like and self-conscious, transport the bin to the back door of the Langtrip mansion. Mr. Rawlins, who always comes with us on these trips, knocks discreetly on the door, looking as refined as if he is bringing a phial of incense. Mrs. Langtrip herself acknowledges his courtesy, comes elegantly forward and these two coo thanks to each other while we delegates from the Mynydd Coch branch of the Jacquerie stand by wondering when they will begin to moult. We boys on the roster all take turns to divert a fixed percentage of the swill to a poor voter called Doherty who lives down the road, has four pigs, three children and sings 'The Rose of Tralee' in the highest key since the Pope dismissed his ersatz trebles.

Mr. Langtrip is sometimes dressed as a colonel of the Home Guard. We have found him stationed at different points of the countryside deep in talk with Mathews the Moloch, and we are told that these two are designing the best methods of putting those boys from Mynydd Coch through their paces and head them, in a high state of preparedness and willingness for sacrifice, towards the boneyard. On the third day of our stay in Trelom Mr. Rawlins puts on his best blue serge suit and his shiny shoes and marshals us on benches in the village hall. In come Mr. Langtrip and the vicar. The three of them sit on the stage and Mrs. Willis, who is resting after her long day by sitting in our midst to get away from the stoves and looking as if she now questions the move, for we are all pretty rank after the wet fields, is reading a woman's weekly.

She says that, speaking as a cook, she can tell us right off that Mr. Rawlins looks boiled and Mr. Langtrip stuffed and if we will get her up to the foot of the platform she will tell us with what. The vicar opens the session. He says that he has not always lived in this fine tranquil old village. Once he lived in Mynydd Coch and he knew something of the gloomy traditions

of dissent and even rebellion which have always been nourished in that division.

"You might think," he says, "that the institution of the squire is a rural antiquity which has gone the way of the bullock-drawn plough and the pixies. But no. The squire is still an active and a constructive force. What that first Colonel Langtrip meant to the loyal peasantry of the seventeenth century, our Colonel Langtrip means to us today. Father, leader, friend, he is all of these."

We can see the film of tears in Wilf's eyes, for these tender words like 'father', 'friend', never fail to finger open the lips of his tear gland. Then Mr. Rawlins gets up and speaks about the Genius of Place and Tradition. He denounces any of us who do not become calmer, bigger, better at the sight of Langtrip Hall as louts. Mr. Rawlins talks for a fair time and we can see that there is a burning love in him for this concept of an embalmed, changeless, time-defying world. Mr. Langtrip is probably too worn out by all the long talks he has on strategy with Mathews the Moloch to take in all Mr. Rawlins' points and he gets dozier and dozier. Mrs. Willis has put her magazine aside and is leaning forward as if eager to determine the exact percentage of herbal flavouring in the mixture. Some of us gesture covertly to Gomer Jones and Wynford Wilkie who are also on the nod, hinting to them that if they can now get their hands on those roped rings they are free to make a record leap providing they get squarely in the middle of that opiate junta on the stage. Then Mr. Langtrip is invited to his feet and he gets upon them with a matured self-importance that is strangely exciting to our own pygmy and unconfident senses. He says he has been told we are scholars. He says that with a clear implication that if he had not been told so and shown forms to prove it he would have taken us to be nothing more or better than an echo of the trouble an earlier Langtrip had with the Lollards and Wat Tyler. He speaks to us of how that Royalist element had held on in Langtrip Hall, sending up retainers to climb the walls and bawl defiance at the Roundheads. When he had run out of retainers still fit to climb and bawl, the Roundheads gave the place up to sack and Mr.

Langtrip gives us every detail of this outrage. Sammy Price at our side keeps nodding in solemn delight as the story goes on and he brings on himself a lot of peering from the vicar to whom Mr. Rawlins whispers something, perhaps that Sammy is the one idiot we have brought along with us to leaven the sage and loyal lump and make a concession to rural cretinism.

At the bottom of the field in which our tents are fixed is a deep glen along the bed of which runs a fairly deep and busy stream. Across this glen have been flung a series of rope bridges which look to us like the most unsafe things on earth. Across these contrivances we see our friends from the Mynydd Coch Home Guard twitching their way and we have told Wilf that if he has any spare space in that shrine of constantly compassionate anxiety to which so much of his being is devoted, it could well be given up to the welfare of such voters as Nick Williams, Peredur Parry, Iolo Vaughan, Uncle Tude and Odo who, as we see it, will be lucky to survive this period and return to a round of reflective talk in the Refreshment shop of Tonio Anselmi with their windpipes still able to take a cup of tea in the old-fashioned perpendicular way.

There is one among these swaying perilous erections which is taller by far than all the others and it is clear from the way this thing blows about in the wind that Mr. Mathews and his advisers mean this to be the last and finest sieve through which only the most valiant and those shrunk by fear even beyond fear will manage to pass. Every time Wilf, sitting on the secure lip of the slope that leads down from our encampment to the glen, looks at it he tells us that the climactic pill which his Uncle Tude has been seeing plain in every dawn for the last fifty years has now decided on its time, place and features. It is this contraption which Mathews has dredged up from the morbid circus of his imagination and rigged up over the chasm. We have contacted Uncle Tude and told him that with his giddiness and essential air of harmless neutrality he will be a fool to try this crossing unless the Germans are about a yard behind him and shouting clearly in both English and Welsh that they are now out to do for the Celts once and for all. Uncle Tude has thought the whole thing out and while

normally he is a voter who avoids fixed conclusions he agrees with us about this rope bridge. He says he likes Mr. Mathews the Moloch who is suave and smiling as you like whenever you touch the thin seam of bonhomie which has survived in the man through all these years of militant land-getting and efforts to geld the liberal spirit of the prolies. But Tude is willing to be put down on Mr. Mathew's list of doomed Jacobins sooner than try that crossing over the glen. Not even keeping his job with the Council is worth it.

The only man we have yet seen to do the crossing on the tallest bridge is Denzil Dummock, and our first view of that performance allowed us to do without breath for a full hour. We have seen Denzil do some remarkable things since he came out of the pit during the slack years and was set up as a foreman on a roads and bridges gang by the Surveyor. That job gave us the chance to see Denzil's real quality in the full light of day and we were grateful to the Council for it. We remember the time they put that small steel bridge over the stream at Mynydd Coch. Denzil spent most of his working days up to his neck in water, for the river was high at the time, jobs were scarce and Denzil was eager to prove himself and make himself loved by the Council and especially by the Surveyor who is an unemotional sort of a voter and slow to take a light. Denzil wanted to show that, even drowned and bumping into the bridge only by pure chance, he would be worthier of his hire than torpid elements like Uncle Tude who made up his crew. At the end of one vexing day he told his assistant to get out of the river and clear off home and leave his arms enough room to lift the bridge on to the struts himself. If the river's current had not accelerated to a point which washed Denzil a furlong away from Mynydd Coch he would have tried it. But this performance of his on the ropes is his best so far, his highest bid for that cream slice which will be awarded to the voter who shows greatest confidence in the stability of the lower stomach wall, and the least desire to question orders from mankind's eccentric masters in the course of an exacting epoch. Denzil clambers across that trapeze with a merry gusto which makes one think that a deep gulf and a rushing stream beneath his

feet are the sort of seasoning he would always like to have had on his walks. And when he trips down to the opposite bank he sneers hard at boys like our friend Peredur Parry who is excused from the more difficult manœuvres as a man who was invalided out of the army, and Iolo Vaughan who, when he first set eyes on that bridge, pinned on the lapel of his battle jacket a certificate from a doctor stating that he faints on the second rung of a step ladder. Odo, we are told, has been so busy until now collecting facts about the battalion and feeding these facts in neat form to Mr. Mathews he has not even heard of the glen and its battery of perils. He is clerking from dawn to dusk and is happy as a lark. Bosworth Bowen, when he first saw Denzil swing himself across the gulf like an ape, says Denzil and Wynford Wilkie would make a fine pair of missing links for man's hair shirt.

The glen is also a training ground in the use of all kinds of small arms such as Stens and hand grenades. Not an hour passes without our hearing, however distant the field in which the County Agricultural Committee has put us to labour, some heavy bang and thud from the thick wood around the stream. And these hints of disruption and death beating out to a rhythm that is no less disquieting for being patchy and sporadic deepen our conviction that out of this mingling of such strange and disparate elements in Trelom, some grimly interesting jape is bound to emerge. Leader in this school of thinking, next of course to Wilf who would think so anyway even if there were nothing warlike going on in the glen, is Sammy Price.

"I've been watching Mathews the Moloch and that dignified-looking voter over the road, Langtrip," says Sammy to us one night after supper. "Every day those two get to look more portentous and ripe for some sort of climax, especially Langtrip who's not yet forgiven Cromwell, let alone the U.S.S.R., and he must be getting stooped and weary from carrying three centuries of pride and pure satisfaction on his back. When he and Mathews decide that their ears have had enough of cries from the lower depths which threaten the security of their riches and convictions, they are going to make

a record pile of those explosive pills in the dingle down there, get all those boys from Mynydd Coch to file in, led by Uncle Tude because he looks the ripest for sacrifice, then get Denzil Dummock to set off the whole lot with his bare teeth. Then the sky will be dark for a good hour and you, Wilf, if you put on your glasses will have the chance of seeing Tude staring down at you from some such area as the planet Uranus and chuckling with pleasure at the change."

"Tell me, Sam," says Spence, "why does that big hammer-headed voter Denzil Dummock always look at you as if you were something gnawing at his entrails?"

"He's daft, that Denzil."

CHAPTER X

THE RAIN drives past the village hall. Breakfast is over. Some of us have helped Mrs. Willis with the dishes. We stand at the door of the hall, raincoats over our shoulders waiting for the lorry which is to take us to the fields. Mr. Rawlins has long abandoned his first resolution to do without mechanical aid. Blossom is tethered near the tents and has not done a stroke since she arrived. There is a shiny hint of repletion in her flanks which pleases us even though we see no trace of a smile in the hard crust of oppression that covers her face. We are glad for Blossom; she has had a lean bleak life of it with Joby Short and has pulled such great loads of vegetables and fruit up and down the slopes of Mynydd Coch she must at times have felt like the very earth. Over the road the manor house of the Langtrips stands compact, as sweet, serene and airy under the rain as under the sun.

The rain is becoming a nuisance. The field in which we are encamped is not well drained. If this monsoon does not break off shortly we shall be floating in to the village hall and giving the ultimatum to Mr. Rawlins that either we move in with him or go home. We have hinted more than once that we would be a lot cosier under a roof that would shrug its shoulders at the weather. He will not hear of it. We think he finds some satisfaction in sleeping in this large barn of a place on his own, tormenting and testing his nerves in friction with the frightening morbidity of those wall-patterns. He says that camping under evil conditions is one of the finest ways of improving a man's character. In the sense that there are formally no flaws in those boys in the churchyard next door, we agree. He gives us a lot of examples of the ways and times he was flooded while camping in his younger days and it seems from his narrative to have happened so regularly we think it would have saved Mr. Rawlins a lot of suspense if he had pegged his tent down right-

away on the bed of a river. He adds that we should be ashamed to be grumbling about a little wetness when those boys down in the glen go from minute to minute almost certain to be blown apart, being from Mynydd Coch and for that reason pretty inept and prone to disaster. To keep the tents waterproof, he says, all we have to do is remember to refrain from touching the canvas when it is wet. He does not stand still long enough for us to tell him that since the rain started boys like Gomer Jones have been doing nothing but moving from one side of the camp to the other testing this theory and finding it quite right.

Around the turn from the main road into the lane where we are waiting, comes the lorry. Driving this lorry is surely the least dependable voter we have ever seen put in charge of a vehicle and the lives of others. He is a lean, dark-haired man with a fine coating of fixative on his scalp, side-burns of a length to make him look too Mediterranean to be real against a background like Trelom. His name is Selwyn and when he talks to you he puts his face close to yours and blinks, which does not help; nor does the way he talks, which sounds as if he took speech-training lessons with the exhaust of his lorry. He wears a dark blue shirt, black trousers and never any jacket. Nakedness would match this man's spirit to perfection, fit his distracted frame like a glove. He was, we have been told, discharged from the air force on the grounds of some nervous complaint. From the way he hurtles through the lanes once he gets us aboard we guess that he must have found in such articles as fighter craft a tendency to dawdle.

Mr. Rawlins welcomes Selwyn. Our leader is done up in several layers of oilskins with a waterproof hood over his slouch. This gives his face a recessive, mysterious look and Selwyn, with his mania to have his face near to that of the person to whom he is talking, is inside Mr. Rawlins' hood in no time, and these two bodies with but a single peak moving in swift circles as Mr. Rawlins backs away in horror from the hot proximity of another mortal, make a good tableau in the quiet rain-soaked lane. Mr. Rawlins cautions Selwyn about excessive speed and reminds him of the precious cargo he is carrying.

Selwyn blinks at us without interest or love. Mr. Rawlins, as Selwyn gets into the driver's seat, mumbles something to us about the need not to worry too much about Selwyn, for in him is the spirit of Drake and it is against the national interest to discourage the reckless urges of such elements. We think too of those other interesting Britons with whom Selwyn seems to have exchanged credentials; Burke and Hare, the boys who filled the graves they then robbed, and Stephen Hawke, that voter who snapped spines as if they were match-sticks. We climb in under the green tarpaulin. Mr. Rawlins takes his place beside Selwyn and we shoot away without apparently any of the usual sounds of starting off, just as if the motive force comes entirely from Selwyn's body. Alice Maude and Jennie are at the gate of the village hall, half in tears as if they do not expect to see us again. Selwyn is among the phenomena that are currently grinding the brittle spirit of Alice Maude and Jennie to a fine powder. Another is Mrs. Langtrip who comes to see them each morning to give them a round of advice and reminiscence and, "Honest to God", Alice Maude tells us, "if she was up on the roof of the bloody hall, we wouldn't feel more below her." She makes them feel as if they were the only two on man's catering flank to come through the Black Death.

We are seated on the benches that run along both sides of the lorry. We are doing forty miles an hour on a surface as rough as the moon's, along lanes that have more twists than the mind of a simple opportunist. Some of us try to sing. We try to make the tune light, some catchy, jivey jingle, but it always fades out after a bar or two and we find ourselves humming some authentic graveyard-number like 'Lead Kindly Light' or 'We Shall Meet On That Beautiful Shore' which are very popular in Mynydd Coch. This is our quiet comment on the future for as long as Selwyn enters into it. Our heads touch the tarpaulin at each fresh bounce. We now understand the reason for this broad green canvas. It is not to keep the rain out; it is to keep us in.

The lorry climbs. We are now in the middle of a long desolate moor. Selwyn stops the lorry near a clump of elms. As we jump down the sun begins to break through as if formulating

a vote of thanks that we still breathe. Selwyn points to a vast weed-choked field and tells us that among the weeds are potatoes and that on this particular sector we shall have to combine the jobs of weeder and picker. Mr. Rawlins nods his head as he hears this and looks rather proud, as if we are the only group who could have qualified for this dual task.

"Follow me," says Selwyn and we make our way to a corner of the field where we see sacks and buckets piled in a small stone shed.

"This is a most interesting tract of earth," says Mr. Rawlins. "A year ago, virgin soil." His voice drops a little there, then it rises. "Today, ploughed and productive."

"What about all these thistles?" asks Bosworth Bowen. "Isn't that going to be rough on the hands?"

"A pity, that. But that's what comes of not having enough manpower. The field was planted but hands for weeding were not available in the early summer. We come late to the fight but not less eager for that."

The side of the field on which we start is not as cumbered with weeds as the rest. Selwyn is going to drive the potato-plough. It is a new one and he keeps looking at it and patting it as if he is expecting to break records. He spreads us at intervals of about six feet right down to the bottom of the field. We have our buckets at the ready.

"And see to it," says Selwyn, "that you get all the potatoes thrown up by the first run cleared by the time I make the second." He starts the engine and we are all tense, all enjoying the sense of integration into a valid, simple-witted undertaking. After assembling the facts of a man's earthly experience under our history teacher, rooting about in the open country even with such a voter as Selwyn will be a piece of pure blessedness. Selwyn is staring into the next field where a group of Land Girls are sitting on a mound, talking.

"Hey, you!" he shouts to Mr. Rawlins.

"Yes? Do you require something?" Mr. Rawlins' tone has sharpness. He clearly thinks that Selwyn has taken the ell after having been given the inch.

"You're a teacher, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am by way of being what you mention." Mr. Rawlins speaks his every word neatly and with a fine modulation. He glances at us as if to say that in conversation, if not in fields, he is more than a match for Selwyn. His voice is so cultured it does not carry through the air and when Selwyn next speaks it is in a roar.

"See those women over there?" Selwyn points to the group of Land Girls in the next field.

"I am not deaf, young man!"

"See those women over there?"

"I see a group of young ladies, certainly."

"Well, they may listen to you. Go over to that hedge and tell them to get up off their arses before the foreman comes."

This is a slingshot for Mr. Rawlins. He is sorry now he went so much out of his way to assure Selwyn that he is not deaf because this piece of dialogue about the Land Girls is one that cuts him to the marrow. He cannot pretend to us that he had not heard Selwyn say anything improper because boys like Gomer Jones and Ted Dolan are rolling about in their joy and urging Mr. Rawlins to get the message over without cuts in the script. He walks over to the hedge which separates us from the girls and he says "Now then, ladies, now then," in a tone which is quite urbane and private and which leaves the problem of the Land Girls untouched.

Then Selwyn begins the ploughing. He and the machine are in fine fettle. Earth and potatoes swirl like spray in our faces. Those whose eagerness has caused them to bend forward too far topple as they take a faceful of dirt and potato. The crop is fat, the potatoes white and waxen. Selwyn races for the bottom of the field. Mr. Rawlins runs behind us spurring us to get every potato picked and out of the way before Selwyn passes again. The last potatoes are going into the sacks on which we see the name of Joby Short when Selwyn begins his second trip. He keeps it up for an hour. Mr. Rawlins has ceased to exhort. He is down with us, down on his knees, his face twisted with effort, looking like one of earth's primal, shrunken acolytes at terrible prayer. He is groaning more loudly than we. Selwyn is jeering at us as he passes, expecting

us to throw in the sponge or sack. If he were a god, our posture would not be more diligently or filthily prostrate, but we do not see that the potato, even in the form of chips, is worthy of worship and we are hoping that Mr. Rawlins' patience will snap and cause him to have Selwyn led off to a clinic for injections of mercy and bromide. We feel bleak, soiled, late-mediaeval and it would not surprise us, as we slip over the first portals of fatigue-torpor, to see Mr. Langtrip in a slashed doublet of tweed come up to us and claim the skin of the chubbier among us as bookbinding material for his private library. We would not mind, although against the exercise of seignorial rights on principle. After an hour like this on the furrows, being fingered with attentive care in a cosy study would be welcome. We are now losing hopelessly in the race. Mr. Rawlins is quite giddy and distraught, in a far worse pass than we are, for he went at the early phases of the labour with a frenzy of willingness which is now calling around for the dividend and finding Mr. Rawlins in his present reeling state very hard to find at home. He is chuckling within a small hysterical frame and once, as Selwyn roars past, starts desperately to pluck potatoes from a neighbour's bucket and throws them into the furrows, telling us with rolling eyes and in about ten painful pants that the work now seems to be getting easier and that Selwyn now appears to be localising the potatoes better. We do not tell him that his reflexes are now clearly in reverse and we advise him to go to one side and lie out flat until he starts seeing the world once more in the normal way. We are now picking about a quarter of the potatoes unearthed. Behind us the earth is becoming lighter and lighter with a murrain of unbucketed produce. Wilf is not bearing up any better than Mr. Rawlins. He too dived into the work instead of quietly wading and he is paying the price. We have to keep giving his body an occasional pull to make him face the right way. He tells us that overstrain is having the strangest effect on him and he tells us that part of the blame for this particular hallucination can be laid on Sammy Price and the remark that Sammy made about seeing Uncle Tude on the planet Uranus. We look up, all feeling backbroken enough to qualify for a

view of Tude in this new position. But Wilf says it is not in the sky that he keeps seeing Tude but in gaps of the hedge that flanks the field on its northern side. In his wearied state there are worms crawling right through Wilf's imagination and grinning at every hole. He even persuades himself that Uncle Tude is dead, gone the way of all flesh as engaged in that dingle and directed by Mathews the Moloch. What he sees staring at him through the gaps is probably Tude's ghost, still too shy to come into the field by way of the gate. We tell him not to be foolish and, eager for any chance to slip away from those furrows and rest, we offer to go with him up to the hedge and prove to him that Uncle Tude, while we concede that he may have been liquidated as part of Mathews' plan to defend Mynydd Coch, is nowhere to be seen on that moor. We edge off, unnoticed by Mr. Rawlins who is a million mental miles away by this time and showing no signs of slackening in his flight, and uncensured by Selwyn who is at a high tide of ecstasy now that he has a covey of harmless thinkers helpless beneath his wheels.

We approach the hedge. In the very first gap I see there is a human face, as clearly outlined as ever I want to see one. But it is not Tude's. It is that of our friend from Mynydd Coch, Iolo Vaughan. Spence sees a face about ten yards further on. This belongs to Peredur Parry. And then there is a cry from Wilf. He has seen Tude again, but this time it is Tude. He has his forage cap off and it is undoubtedly his baldness as he peered into the field that gave him the ectoplasmic look which made Wilf think of him as a corpse. We ask these three voters what they are up to, creeping about behind a hedge so far from their home base. Peredur offers cigarettes all round and we direct them to the small stone shed where we sit down on a pile of sacks to have a quiet smoke and a chat. They tell us that they were detached from the main body by Mathews the Moloch who was in bustling Napoleonic vein and eager to work off some of the hints he has read in the handbook and told them to go off and create a diversion. So here they are up on the moor, lost, but doing the best they can.

Tude leans back, all in. Physically, the quick scrambling

they have been doing over country is in too sharp contrast with his activity as a Council workman which is carried out on flat places like roads and at a thoughtful pace. Mentally he is worried giddy at the thought of what Mathews will say when he finds that three of his guardsmen have been diverting in the company of such harmless and unmilitary elements as ourselves. But Iolo and Peredur are very happy. They enjoy the solitude and they stare out fascinated from the shelter at the sight of Selwyn tearing up the potatoes and they inhale deeply as if the torn earth has a perfume about it of which they cannot have too much. Iolo and Peredur have always had a streak of worship for soil and seed and harvest and this has made our talks with them at Tonio Anselmi's refreshment shop acceptably odd. The past lives of these two voters too have an interest and Nick Williams has related their origins and development to us more than once. As we have watched them in Mynydd Coch through the years they have worn what we take to be an alien and perplexed look as if they have just been examining their root and have now decided to put in for a change of flowerpot. We have often heard them express disgust with the grey squalid look of Mynydd Coch. They were intimate friends long before the war. Their fathers were deeply religious men but Iolo and Peredur failed from the start to get into the rhythm of the chapels and liked nothing better than long contemplative hours striding over the hills studying nature and even now when they speak of trees and flowers there is a great rich wind of beauty blowing through their words. About the time war began their friendship received its first check. Peredur married a girl called Sophia but Iolo was as often in their company as not. Peredur went into the army and moved off to the Near East. Iolo who was a reject and stayed on in his job in a grocery store took to calling on Sophia and consoling her. At first his visits were short and he explained that he was merely taking her gifts of mushrooms and healing herbs, and spoke with her about the magic of the fields. But his visits grew longer, even at such seasons as found no mushroom in sight and the busybodies of the place concluded that not even herbs and the most detached approach to

field-lore could explain the lateness of the hour at which Iolo left Sophia and the rapt excited look on his face. Peredur was invalided out of the army with some complaint brought on by the desert and the Government sent him back to his job in the Mynydd Coch steel-works. As soon as he landed back at Mynydd Coch he was met at the station by a committee of such pious and forbidding voters as his father, Iolo's and Mr. Tregethin and his platoon who were out to keep the species chaste and tidy even in an epoch of hæmorrhage. They denounced Iolo as a snake and a fornicator and demanded that Peredur use some of the crafty tricks he had learned as a soldier in pummelling Iolo back to normal. Peredur, who is one of the most patient and obliging elements you will ever find, said he was delighted to know that his friend Iolo, who had always been so shy, should now have branched out to the point of talking nature to a woman. But the Committee were not to be fobbed off with this and Peredur saw in his genial way that they had as much right to their entertainment as Iolo to his and he nodded his head with a smile when Mr. Tregethin for the tenth time made that statement about an eye for an eye which has been serving to keep the voters so myopic for so long. He marched off to the house.

The spectators muttered approval as he put his hand on his bayonet. Iolo was in the kitchen sitting near Sophia but doing no more than telling her how to spot a toadstool even in poor light. He glimpsed Peredur's face as he came through the door, tanned, virile, savage and that band of legates from the Old Testament closing in from behind like a pack. He left Sophia and fled. Peredur chased him a dozen times around Mynydd Coch square, annoying the committee by pausing from time to time and asking them if his performance came up to standard. Then he stopped suddenly, waited for Iolo who was now blind with strain but still running in wild manic circles to come abreast of him, smiled at the elders as if to say that justice had now been done, embraced the gasping, half-crazed Iolo in a brotherly way and led him off to Tonio Anselmi's for a cup of tea. We were there at the time and we still regard it as one of the most nicely flavoured sketches we

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have ever witnessed. When they got back to the house they found that Sophia had packed her bags and run off with a lecherous official at the Ordnance Factory called Gordon Gilbert the Gonad. It turned out that she had been driven nearly off the hinge by Iolo's talk of flowers, fur and feather and dreaded having the ration doubled on Peredur's return. So Iolo and Peredur are together again now, full time, and as they stand there with us in the small stone hut on that drenched moorland they are delighted to find us engaged in these capers of caressing the soil's fertility. They tell Sam Price that they are particularly glad on his account to find us out here wrapped up in life's fundamentals because they have always considered Sam to be dangerously pensive, overtly a victim of the dark stain of over-awareness and the unresolvable conflicts in modern life. We hear Mr. Rawlins call and we arrange to meet Iolo and Peredur, together with Nick Williams, in the village of Dintle, that evening.

We return to the battle and are glad when we get to the sea of weeds. Selwyn makes two attempts to drive across the field and his blades are either tangled or bent. He gets down furious and accuses us of having deliberately introduced some of the tougher types of weed into the apparatus and he astonishes us by tugging at some of the longer trailers and charging that these are not native to this heath at all. We explain that such a thought is too bright and cunning by far to have got into our heads in the grey introspective state we find ourselves in at the moment. Selwyn says we will now have to wait for a new tractor or for a repair gang. Wilf is watching Selwyn with unmoving magnetised eyes. Extroverts always affect Wilf like the Hamelin piper. The more assured and brutal they are, the louder the piper plays. Suddenly Selwyn's attention breaks away from us. He sees a small hare dart from a hedge. He chases, catches, kills and skins it with a snort, all in a few seconds and curses because he has not got his dog to feed it to. He throws it at Gomer Jones who ducks and laughs. Wilf dips his head into a cool wet bed of ferns, moaning. He recovers only when Mr. Rawlins sends him shepherding after Benny Turner and Ted Dolan who are skulking about on the

flank of the Land Girls. We hear Ted shouting to the girls as he returns that tomorrow he will bring his trumpet. 'Oh will you now!' cried Mr. Rawlins as he hounds Ted back into the fold, his eyes glowing like Savonarola's.

We sit beneath the elms, our hands cut and smarting from our struggle with the weeds. Our reflections are simple and at bedrock. Our mental bag is turned utterly inside out. To the east we can see Trelom. Our attention is focused by a stray gleam of sunlight on the ruined chapel between Trelom and Dintle. It is one of the very few buildings hit in this area by bombs from aircraft. There have been some brief attacks on the aerodrome at Dintle but the only damage done so far has been to that small Congregationalist conventicle and a byre belonging to a strange secluded old voter called Chidelow who lives on the hill above the village hall and to whom our labour has been promised. There is something in the colourless fragility of the ruin which serves the soaked, dim landscape as an admirable soul.

There is no sign of a new tractor. Selwyn drives us back reluctantly to lunch. He telephones a superior and tells us that we shall be required for the next few days on the fields of Mr. Langtrip.

CHAPTER XI

THE SUN shines brightly in the afternoon. Ten of us have been detached for work on a swede field belonging to Mr. Langtrip. The rain of the last few days seems to have singled out this field for special care. It is a marsh and we spend a lot of time sliding on our backs as our feet slither along the treacherous surface, shocking our senses and nearly changing our personality and the whole course of our lives with the sharp bill-hooks with which we have been entrusted and which we hold gingerly in front of us. We are to treat the swedes with these hooks and we can see that our apprenticeship under these circumstances is going to be gruelling. Our antics provide good sport for the two employees of Mr. Langtrip who have come along to outline to us the nature of the work we are to do and keep us to it once it has begun. The first of these is Jonas Langdon, a sandy, tall, cheerful man with a strong Dorsetshire cadence in his voice. It is wonderful to us conditioned morlocks from Mynydd Coch to see anyone who harmonises so perfectly with the background of fresh air and cultivated soil as Mr. Langdon. He is as delighted to see us recruited into agriculture as our anti-industrial friends Iolo and Peredur and he gives us our instructions in a high happy voice. With him is another element about whom our feelings are more involved. He is a short, sly-looking voter who bends forward with a half smile every time he looks at you as if he has now definitely caught you in the act for which they will shortly be sending you to the County Keep. His name is Hirwen Slater and Ted Dolan tells us that he once lived in Mynydd Coch, helped break a strike or two, got invalided out of the pits with a leg injury, was accepted as a smallholder in an agricultural estate run by some social welfare bodies, found himself black-balled by his fellow members after a series of petty thefts and

edged out, and is now working as a labourer for Mr. Langtrip. He lives in one of the smaller, frowsier cottages that extend below the church. As he follows Mr. Langdon about we can see him eye the tall man with distaste which turns instantly to complaisance when Langdon speaks to him.

A car drives up. An agent of one of the big greengrocery concerns of the county jumps out and cries in a loud voice that the merchants at Cardiff are at their wits' end for swedes and that we are to have a few tons of these vegetables sacked and ready for delivery without fail the next morning. Mr. Langdon points out to the official that the field is in a bad condition, his labour-force clumsy and asks why in God's name the merchants could not have made their request at a more opportune time. The agent looks annoyed at this stream of argument from Langdon and cuts him short with a wave of his notebook. He looks around at us and says he knows that the labour at Langdon's disposal is as raw as the swedes but it's money that makes the mare go round and it will be gravely and ruinously inconvenient for the merchants at the Fruit and Greengrocery Exchange if they do not have the swedes ready for marketing on the morrow.

"The price will be right, the price will be just right," he keeps saying and the sound of him makes the world shrink and darken around our heads. Sam Price says if the case is so urgent, the merchants could well be given billhooks and dumped down in this field to stiffen our ranks. The agent tells Sam that the best course for him is to keep his mouth shut, his sack open and his swede-arm busy.

"That's no way to talk to young volunteers," says Mr. Langdon but we can see Slater looking daggers at Sam and trying to assure the agent that the name of the merchants will never again be taken in vain in that field.

Then Mr. Langdon tells us what to do. The swedes have to be topped and tailed, the crown of greenery and the straggling tail severed. We marvel at the beautiful smooth, unbroken movement with which Mr. Langdon drags the vegetable from the ground, shakes the dirt loose and cuts away the unwanted parts with two economical swings of the hook. He does this

several times and then we say, in quiet voices, that we think we now have the hang of it.

"Swing it in the wind and give it a quick one," he says. He turns to Wilf, who is dragging the hook gently up and down the side of a swede as if shaving it and finding the going slow without lather and who looks as if he will be a century over one furrow at this rate, and tells him that the important word in his directive is 'quick'. We work away with a will, getting our legs and arms filthy and drawing blood once in a while as we are tempted into rashness, fascinated by the numbing rhythm and suggestive facility of our mutilating pilgrimage along the furrows. Mr. Langdon goes off behind a hedge. He is tall enough to be seen as he stands there attending to his business.

"Swing it in the wind and give it a quick one," he roars and for a moment that puzzles us.

Mr. Slater is supposed to go ahead of us setting the pace but in the main he dawdles at our side or in the rear, sneering at vegetables that have been clumsily trimmed to the size of a thin fritter or too delicately touched. We all feel that if Mr. Slater could develop a top and a tail as part of some bonus scheme for countrymen he is one bit of produce with whom we would not fail to do a perfect job. When the afternoon ends Mr. Langdon congratulates us all on our effort.

"Wouldn't surprise me if the merchants now forget all about them and leave them in a corner to rot. The fields and the people in them work too well for the merchants. It's little thanks they get. But you've done your side of the job and you've done well for lads who are new to this style of work."

We thank him and as we leave the field he comes close to Spence, Sam and myself.

"If you'll be working much for Langtrip during your stay here, keep an eye on Slater there. He's a sly slippery one and there's a funny blackness inside the man that I've never been able to fathom. He's the best tale-teller in the district and it's more than once he's tried to spoil things for me with Mr. Langtrip. He wants a better house and a better job. Don't blame him for that. Langtrip's pigs live better than Slater and have fewer problems. But he won't care who's left flat on his

back to enable him to get them. He'll do no good in Trelom, that man, nor that daughter of his either, that Mabel, the wild bitch."

We listen with interest. We did not realise that there was so much drama on the boil within a short distance of that dead-looking village hall. We stare hard at Mr. Slater as he comes ploughing his way thoughtfully through the marsh behind us, more respectful and genial towards him now that we know he has all these dark and significant ripples moving over his particular pool.

That evening we walk over to Dintle. Sam has to stop at the hall to supervise fatigue parties who have been given such jobs as wood-cutting and coal-hauling. He will join us later when Mr. Rawlins tells him that he considers the enclosure well enough stocked with fuel.

The lanes, in the sunlit, fast-drying evening, are at their loveliest. Our ears, emancipating themselves slowly from the thematic Mynydd Coch sounds of whistles, steam pistons, nailed boots on paving stones, are now receiving the full naked ecstasy of bird song. We feel that at the nodal evolutionary point where man abandoned flight, feathers and consistently passionate singing in favour of thinking and bowler hats, man may not have been altogether in the right.

There is an air force flavour about Dintle. Its central building is a strong, eighteenth-century tavern called The Broken Plough, run by a converted miner with battered nose and ears called Teilo Thadwald. Attached to the main body of the tavern is a large wooden hut which Teilo runs as a café and fish and chip bar. It is here that we have arranged to meet our friends from Mynydd Coch, Nick and his companions.

They turn up half an hour late. The interval of waiting we pass enjoyably listening to Teilo Thadwald who is very interested in books and appears to have lived everywhere on earth in his time, including Mynydd Coch for which he has no regrets and which he equates, as a white man's grave, with that other difficult area, Sierra Leone.

When Iolo Vaughan and Peredur Parry come in through the door we notice that they are practically carrying between

them Odo Montgomery who is pale as a ghost and making sounds which Teilo Thadwald who wears a First Aid badge says sound like the gasps of the dying. Teilo brings Odo a cup of tea. Odo sits hunched on a bench, staring blankly in front of him, paying no attention even when we close in and remind him to take a suck at the tea. He looks like one of those broken men we see in pictures about beachcombers down at our main cinema, The Dog, but Odo is better shaven and less lustful than those elements in the South Pacific. He is neat even in crises of despair and chaste at all times to a point that makes the rougher and readier voters regard him as a eunuch.

Nick Williams explains to us what has befallen Odo. That morning Odo wound up the last of his big administrative jobs for Mathews the Moloch and as he was walking about the camp he was accosted by Denzil Dummock with a frown and a snarl. Denzil said that if Odo was now done with being a pencil-pushing nancy-boy, what about a bit of real soldiering? Odo was full of thoughtless pride at the time, having just been praised by Mathews for the good work he had done with the book-keeping. He replied that anything that Denzil could do, so could he, Odo, not only as well but with that fine veneer of conscious aptitude which makes all the difference in these things. Odo apparently had not been listening to the hair-bleaching stories of the glen and its hazards, told him by such worried voters as Uncle Tude. The open air and sense of authority had ripened Odo into a readiness to regard Tude as a psychopathic freak. Denzil took him down to the glen and without any subtle preliminary baiting which would not be in Denzil's line led him to the tallest of the rope bridges and instructed Odo to follow him. Odo was now in the grip of a delirious panic, giving out short peals of laughter of the rootless kind which usually qualify voters for the County Mental and rubbing his eyes and yawning pathetically as if urging the alarm-clock to get on with the job of bringing this nightmare to a close and showing Denzil out of the bedroom. If Odo stopped short at the shoulders he would not have less of a head for height, and we remember his telling us when he expected to be called up that he is glad so many of our major wars have

been fought out in such handy areas as the Netherlands, this being just the sort of flat terrain to soothe the psyche of a voter like himself who wears vertigo as if it were a tail. Denzil clambered up and over and laughed with harsh delight at Odo trembling on the other bank. Odo closed his eyes, set his teeth with a violent fixity that seems to have shortened his whole face by an inch or two and managed to climb to the horizontal ropes. He opened his eyes, saw below the furious stream and Denzil guffawing his ribs loose. Both had the effect of burning his tiny resolution to ash. Down he went, head first, with every one of his explosive, lifelong dreads rocketing him on his way. He took a fair time to appear. Some believed that he must have hit bottom with such force the whole river-bed would have to be scraped before it yielded Odo. But they came across him in a thick bed of osier, head above water, hanging on to the reeds and looking, so Nick said, almost happy within the limits imposed on any voter who has just been half drowned and utterly stunned.

"Couldn't the Board of Education make a grant to have that Denzil hollowed and used as a cupboard?" says Bosworth Bowen. "He's nothing but a sadist, a Nazi. Give him enough rope and he'll finish off all these tender unmilitary elements like Odo and Wilf's Uncle Tude."

"Why should there be such people as Denzil Dummock who like only to torment their fellow creatures?" asks Wilf. "Shouldn't they have been squeezed out by now by the very pain they cause? A loud stupid disturbing man. Why wasn't he ever taken in hand and silenced, especially in a place like Mynydd Coch which has an Institute with slogans about the dignity of man painted up on all the walls. He must have been like this from the very beginning, never any different. Why must they always be allowed to come to such terrible fullness?"

"That's the funny thing," says Nick. "Denzil wasn't always the same. Once he was very different from what he is now."

"I thought there was something like that about him," says Spence. "He always seems to be waiting with his head down for the charge of some thought, some memory, that's going to rip his temporary peace to tatters. And twice I've seen his

whole expression change as he looks at Sam Price. What's Sam to him? Why does he look at Sam as if Sam were the cold rain outside the early morning window?"

"Once their paths crossed. I don't know how much of it Sam remembers. The years pass. What's vivid and still pulsing and pulling in me may be unknown to you lads. You remember that Sam's father was a leading rebel, a radical who hardly slept at his job of improving man's ultimate shape."

"We heard about it. He went to gaol. He got a beating on the way there because he tried to show he didn't think that gaol was the place for him. He died of the dust-trouble not long after he got out. Sam has the cuttings which tell of these things from a paper. Off and on he takes them out and reads them. But how in God's name does a man like Denzil fit into all this?"

"Twenty years ago there were no two greater friends in Mynydd Coch than Denzil and Lew Price. Denzil was never as good a student as Lew but when there were hard jobs to be done, trouble with the police during strikes and demonstrations, the handpress for turning out leaflets and bulletins to be moved under the very noses of the narks, Denzil was the boy. He was fearless and his face was always alight with a great joy. Then the movement began to falter and rust. The mine-owners beat us to a frazzle. They left us without even jobs to keep us fully alive. It was a sullen, mad, mouldering sort of world we lived in when the last of the big strikes found us even nearer the grave than we had been before. Men like Lew Price were large enough to see the closing of collieries and the gutting of whole towns as nothing more than incidents in a struggle to which many more generations might yet have to be given up. He led the first hunger marches to London and that hurried up the job the lung-dust had begun. Denzil had in the meantime found out the people with whom social strugglers make their peace and he made it. He glued his mouth, bade the whole notion of a freer and less scabrous mankind find its own way to the culvert and got a fair job under the Council. He undertook his conversion with a thoroughness that would have got him a medal in science. He lifted weights, whored, swilled

ale, gave more muscle power to the Surveyor's Department than was ever right or proper in a steam age and became a deadly and violent enemy of all those ideas of change and progress and protest of which he had once been so serene a champion. When Lew was leading the fight against mass-evictions by the colliery company it was Denzil who led the band of advanced thinkers who took a bellyfull of beer from the pit-manager down at the Constitutional Club, called in on Lew, tore up and burned about a half of his little library, then left him flat and senseless on the floor from a fist thump at the back of the neck. Lew's wife, Sam's mother, wasn't much help to Lew at the time. Do you boys know her?"

"We've seen her a few times," says Spence. "When we've called in for Sam she's either been out at work down at the Trading Estate or she keeps upstairs until we've gone. A funny woman, we always thought, but very pretty. The whitest skin in Mynydd Coch."

"She was always pretty. White skin, as you say, and hair that sings in the heart of all blackness, a magnet for voters who lean that way. Why Lew ever married her I don't know. If ever a man kept singing out to trouble to tell it where to find him it was Lew. It was as if he were walking around his life and making sure that he was going to be burned crisp on all flanks, as if he didn't lay up enough bruises for himself holding up his banner of scorn on the social and political front. Elspeth, that's Sam's mother, had always been a high flyer, fond of dancing and all that. She hadn't been married to Lew a year before she felt she had married a ghost and was living in a tomb of cinders. An average cat would have been more faithful to him than she was. It was Lew's mother who really saw Sam through childhood. Hating Lew and his shabby penniless seriousness became a religion to Elspeth; she put real rapture into it. When Lew went off for his periodical stays in hospital or gaol other men moved in to keep her company more or less openly. When Lew was being led off by the police for resisting the evictions he was a sick man, dying fast. I was walking down to the Mynydd Coch police station at the side of the little group of policemen who had him in their midst. It was a

summer day, not unlike this one. He lifted his face and looked around at the hills that seemed that evening to be higher than ever, very cool and full of peace. I could feel the fires of his sickness and anger rising inside him. He stared into the big unamiable faces of the policemen and it was just as if his disgust leaped up from the stream of his patience. He broke away from their grasp and made for the mountains, towards that thin white waterfall that comes down from Prophet's Peak after heavy rain. A man, not a policeman, came out from a house at the hill's foot. He took the situation in at a glance, gave a bellow of triumph, just as if this moment was one he had long been waiting for to make sense out of his whole life, and caught Lew around the legs in a tackle that was not an inch out of place."

"Denzil?"

"Himself. It was his neatest physical jerk. Lew cracked his head as he fell. He was only half-conscious as he completed the journey down to the station. And behind came Denzil, rather more than half-drunk, bawling out some story of how he had been cavorting the night before with Elspeth in a back lane near that dance-hall, The Kick and The Sprag. Lew was dead within a month of coming out of gaol that time. When he was waiting for burial Denzil came on to a few of us as we were talking together on the hillside. He said he was going down to Lew's, that Elspeth wanted him, wanted him to take the taste of Lew alive and Lew dead out of her mouth. He would have gone too. We could hear the stupid malice screaming from the man. And Elspeth would have taken him for she hadn't completed the jewel of aching bitchery that she was fashioning. But our thoughts on that hillside were hard and rounded and bitter. And we gave Denzil a taste of what he had given Lew. I don't think it hurt him much and I don't think it healed him at all. He went on from strength to strength. The Surveyor had only to point a thing out to Denzil and that thing was on the move even if there were voters on the thing at the time telling him to take it easy; and some of the County families fêted him as a saint of untiring and uncritical willingness. But there's one thing in all this that surprises me.

Off-hand, I'd have said that the process of changeover from being a tender and comradely man to being a brutal and self-centred lout had been complete in Denzil, that a whole new tough skin had formed over his brain, silencing any voice of pity. But what you say about the way he looks at Sam bears out a thought that I, too, have had lately; that even in Denzil there is a strange road along which phantoms sometimes rise and walk. Sam's very like Lew to look at, very like . . . Hullo, Odo, boy, I'm glad to see you brightening up. There's been a very peculiar expression on you for a couple of hours. I think The Broken Plough is open now. Feel like coming in and letting Teilo Thadwald serve us some beer?"

"No, thanks, Nick," says Odo, working his neck from side to side very slowly, as if trying to prove that it is still doing its job of keeping head and body working for the same life. "No, thanks. I can't bring myself to like beer. I wish I could. I think it would strengthen my foundation, make me less of a slender tower that leans in every wind. Why was I only half-born, Nick? And why, being as I am, should I attract overgrown oafs like Denzil Dummock as a cheese would a rat?"

"You and your kind are their feast, Odo. As long as you lend yourselves to this sort of bounty, the feasting will go on."

"I suppose so, Nick. Oh, this tea is nice and strong." He breathes heavily into his cup and seems to be thinking hard. "But I'm giving this warning, and I want all you boys to listen and take it in. Denzil Dummock had better be careful."

"Of course he will," says Iolo Vaughan, smiling, as if he wants to be all the help he can to Odo, "Of course he will. Any more capers like that one today and they'll be hanging him on your account."

"I wasn't thinking along those lines," says Odo a bit peevishly. "I was listening, although through a haze, to all that stuff that Nick was saying about Lew Price and the way Denzil changed. If he did, so can I. In the life of everyone, someone else must operate as an instrument of change. I feel a terrible friction arising between me and Denzil. At the sight of him a sharp pain of ferment starts up in parts of me that have been inert up until now. Since the war started I've read

lots of cases of young elements who've left home quiet as lambs, reading from the Bible every whipstitch, joining the Oxford Group and shrinking even from such simple antics as self-abuse. Then the army gets them. They are bullied a bit. They get bayonet-drill and do those commando capers with daggers. Kill your man without a sound and it's just like with a violin. You want to get better and better, quieter and quieter. Then the Bible for them goes clean out of print; they start off on a programme of carnality that has even the goats telling them to ration it out over the years, and then even straightforward manoeuvres like fornication cease to make their blood bubble; they take to carving up voters whether they are officially enemies or not."

"What has all this got to do with you, Odo? Whatever ingredient it is that makes those boys touch such heights was smothered in you at birth. If Nature hadn't made you passive, a born receiver and doormat, the spell that the Clerk to the Council puts on you would have done the job."

"Don't be too sure now," says Odo. He is looking around at us over his cup and he has his eyes narrowed and steely, the image of many voters we have seen whose main trick is to look ruthless and manic. "Don't forget what I told you about that terrible friction. I feel it grinding out a new set of organs for me every time I clamp eyes on that bloody Denzil. Hear that? I don't normally swear but that was just a small part of the grinding. Since I left Mynydd Coch last week new winds have been playing on me. The dough of Odo Montgomery is rising in an oven of new perspectives."

We are all glad to hear these words. We have felt for a long time that this element has been too plastic and a standing target for the fingers of nature's chosen nuisances like Mr. Rawlins. We wish him well and Spence advises him not to do too much adding-up and book-keeping during the remainder of his stay because there is nothing like arithmetic to impede a man who is out to become a coarse and homicidal libertine. We tell him that any bit of transformation is good that may provide an answer to the problem of Denzil Dummock.

We leave the cafe which is now filling with customers, mainly

airmen. We make our way, with Iolo Vaughan as our guide, across fields and through woods, to the smooth turf of a cliff-top which looks over Dintle Bay. We all lie down on our backs under the warm evening sun, making no effort to analyse the tranquillity in which we are absorbed, abandoning briefly our chronic hobby of trying to account for and make faces at the odds we live against. Below us on the beach we see about forty voters playing on the sand and bathing. Odo is just saying his present serenity and contentment make him almost sorry for the obscene resolution he took to exact a tooth for a tooth back at Teilo Thadwald's tea-rooms, when Spence notices something familiar about one of the bathers.

"That Denzil seems to hang on to us like a tassel. There he is now, dressed as a bather and looking very happy." He glances over at Odo, thinking to hear another outburst and another instalment of change. But Odo sits calmly down, his eyes on the skyline, at that moment beyond even the power of Denzil to challenge and appal. We study the beach again and we see that Denzil, in a tight blue bathing-suit which slavishly dots nature's every i, is doing a kind of mating dance with a fair-haired girl at the water's edge. This seems to be a good day for water in the life of Denzil, having lured Odo into Tre-lom river in the morning and being about to plunge this blonde into the sea at Dintle Bay.

"She's a Waaf," says Peredur. "She's stationed at a part of the Dintle camp near where we are. She's a nice-looking girl."

"Women draw Denzil like a poultice. Must be a very good comforter, the libido, properly used."

Denzil and the girl dress. She appears to be teasing and the little we can hear of his voice has an underside of brownish annoyance. An airman comes clambering over the rocks, calls the girl who rushes over to him. Denzil is left alone, dark in the face and beating his fists together. He adjusts his cap and makes his way up to the tavern on Dintle Head, 'The Mariners'.

Nick is resting a pouting stare on the deep blue sky.

"What are you thinking of, Nick?" asks Iolo in his quick voice.

"Lew Price."

"Brighten your thoughts, boy. Lew's dead. And all the dark fussy epochs of stoppages and strife is dead with him. People can smile again now and it would have been better for Lew if he had smiled a bit too instead of badgering society to let him smash his fists to a pulp against its damned ribs. That Mynydd Coch is a hell of a place. I'd like to bury myself somewhere between here and Trelom, breathing air that's spotless, digging earth that may not always yield but which won't hate you for your efforts. A couple more years in that shop of Harry Carewis will choke me into the Black Meadow. There's a little cottage about two miles from here. Peredur and I have been looking at it. We've got a bit put by and when Peredur can get his release from the stripmill we are coming down here. We don't live long and we don't live twice and we want this once to make sense, to be able to stand up and smile with kind eyes and teeth that don't want to snap. That Mynydd Coch is a stooped, frightening place."

"Granted, boy, granted," says Nick. "Good luck to you and Peredur. But you can't put Lew Price to one side as easily as that. If our lives have any colour and poetry, his life and death went to the dyeing and the rhyming. A private peace is the answer for some, the only kind of supper that makes a day worth while, but some of us are plagued by a sense of others. I've got a fair job now. I've got a garden. I send off a pools coupon every week. I read the serial in the Sunday paper. I go over to the Club on my free nights for a few pints, a chat and a game of snooker. And when I think that my little graveyard is at its quietest and least disturbed, Lew Price strolls by and tells me that that's not all, that all hasn't yet been said, that he'll come knocking once again."

"For a voter who doesn't believe in God, Nick, you're too full of the stuff that makes hymns for anybody's comfort."

We watch two tankers chug westward along the channel. A stack far out on a headland sends up smoke to join a deepening cloud.

"Good luck to you," says Nick again, but without any brightness in his tone. "If holes to hide in and forget are to be our

only shrines, then good luck to everybody, even Denzil Dummock, who's got more to forget than anybody. Come on, lads. If we're going to have more rain, and those clouds say we will, this is a poor place to welcome it."

We walk back to Dintle, hastening only when a raindrop touches our faces. We are still tired after the day's work. We make for Teilo Thadwald's chip-bar which, next to Teilo Thadwald's tavern, is the busiest social centre in the place.

The evening is darkening as we join the press of people who are filling the space between the counter and the door. It is a small shop and Mrs. Thadwald and a helper are working hard to get the first consignment of chips cooked and in the serving pan. Lemonade boxes are stacked against the blue-papered walls and the luckier ones among the customers are seated on these. We get tired of the jostling and adjourn to the steps of an ancient Celtic cross which stands in the square of the village. We see Denzil, looking happier and brighter in the face than he did down at Dintle beach, come up the road and with him is Hirwen Slater, the man who was the pace-maker in Mr. Langtrip's swede field. As they pass we can hear that they have both been having a few pots. They are discussing a lightning strike which has just been declared and ended in the mining valleys over the hills eastward from Mynydd Coch. Both Denzil and Slater are pontifical on this issue.

"Shoot the sods," says Denzil and Slater in his quick ferrety way glances around as if looking for a weapon with which to send Denzil forth. They enter The Broken Plough together, clearly happy in each other's company, whatever the motive that prompted their meeting.

We go back into the chip-bar. The fires are giving trouble and Peredur, from whom furnaces withhold no secret, goes around the corner of the counter to help Mrs. Thadwald get some air and life into them. Teilo pokes his head in and gives us all a cheerful good evening. He says that a little entertainment will make the time go more quickly. He suggests that we provide a few turns to amuse ourselves. He asks three or four voters to move away from the lemonade boxes which can serve

as a kind of stage. We think Teilo will be lucky to find anyone bold enough to perform in such a tiny theatre as his shop. A good gesture from a really earnest reciter and he would have his hand in the chip-fat. But hardly have the words come out of Teilo's mouth when a girl with long legs and thick lips that hang wetly away from her teeth jumps on to the boxes and strikes an immediate pose.

"That's it, Mabel," say some of the voters.

"Let's have 'Yours,' Mabel. You've got the voice for that. Do that sobbing effect. It's really marvellous."

One element, with a blue scarf and a sombre face who keeps reminding me of Billy Bones after his last fit, turns to me and says earnestly: "The Dintle Vera Lynn."

"Thank you, Miss Slater," says Teilo, but his voice is without enthusiasm and it is clear that he would like to see Miss Slater's long legs anywhere except on his lemonade boxes. But in a small chip-bar there are dangers in having the chairman too fussy.

"Is this Hirwen Slater's daughter?" I ask.

"The same. The Dintle Vera Lynn. That's what the Welfare Officer up at the camp calls her and he ought to know."

"What does she do except sing?"

"She's a help up at the farm of Bowen Chidelow."

Mabel arranges a couple of necks in front of her. One of them belongs to the man with the blue scarf. The necks are to serve as a rest for her legs. Mabel says she is going to sing a new number 'Wherever you are on the Rockies, My Song is All for You'. Before starting to sing she arranges her face into one of the saddest expressions we have seen and her first note is a sob of thoughtless grief that twists the feelings of her audience like twine. She has the loudest female voice we have heard counting one or two voters in Mynydd Coch who have gone into special training to make themselves heard above about twenty kids, and we can see Teilo's wife looking worried and shielding the range with her body as if afraid that Mabel's blowing is going to cool the fat. We can believe what Mabel said in the title of this song. That voter in the Rockies could have his head under a hundred feet of rock and he would be

lucky if he does not hear Mabel. Every time she puts on the sob her whole body shakes and her right knee does a tattoo on the neck of the man with the blue scarf who is getting to look more and more like Billy Bones with the strain as the song goes on. But he is smiling all the same as if he finds something in Mabel which makes suffering worth while. The audience give her a genuine round of applause at the end.

"If she could only keep her mind off the boys she'd be a marvel."

"Dintle's Sweetheart of the Forces," says the man with the blue scarf as he hands Mabel down from her box and massages his neck. She goes to the counter and is served with the first bag of chips and goes off to eat them standing on another lemonade box in another part of the shop. She is staring at us with a fixed voracious smile which says that here is a girl who would not even wait for the mustard. Behind us Iolo Vaughan is giving us the substance of a talk he once heard at the Library and Institute on the habits of such female insects as the Praying Mantis which consume the male insect in the very act of love, whittling the groom down to a grim minimum until only the more significant of his basic rudiments remain. We accept Iolo's analogy as a good one and we stare back at Mabel Slater, pensive and preparing ourselves for the tooth.

Then Nick remembers that Spence, Bosworth, Wilf and I used to sing in a quartet in the days when we belonged to the Bethel Band of Hope at Mynydd Coch. Our speciality was action-songs with death leading at every bend but now and then we used to do harmless and neutral numbers like lullabies and the slower folk tunes, which were always popular with the older folk and brought us in many a sixpence and a mixed bag of toffees. We tell Nick that our voices have now broken to a point which makes us wonder whether virility has not been carrying the thing too far. Wilf has not taken such a radical drop into the lower register as the rest of us. His voice still slithers as if the indecision which keeps the inside of his skull in such a bubble is general right throughout his person. But Nick says it will be all right if we only remember the harmonies. We say we do and group ourselves around the lemonade box

which has just been vacated by Mabel. Ted is telling the people around him that he is sorry he has forgotten his trumpet and his sorrow is mainly because we once had a part-song about the sinking of 'The Birkenhead' which requires a series of calls on the bugle. He takes out his mouth-organ instead and gives us the note. We get started on 'David of the White Rock', and we sing it with a smooth sincere melancholy which persuades even Mrs. Thadwald to put up her scoop for a minute or so to listen and be reminded that beyond her chip range there is a whole life of overdone complexity. For a few seconds as we approach the end of the first verse there is a racket of angry voices from outside and Nick says it would be better if we remind these rodneys without delay that this shouting is out of place, that we owe more respect to the folk-genius than to be interrupting such a jewel of ancient and perfect gloom as 'David of the White Rock.' We fall silent. Denzil's voice, higher even than its usual roar and tipped with a point of murderous spleen can be heard. On a quieter plane we hear the sly, whimpering tone of Hirwen Slater.

"If I want to state my views in your pub, I will," says Denzil.

"State your views by all means," comes back the voice of Teilo Thadwald; "but neither you nor any other hooligan is going to come into my house and bully my customers. Either you'll keep outside or I'll see your officer. And take that little pimp Slater with you. We've had enough trouble with him too."

Then there is peace again and we resume our song. Denzil lurches into the light of the shop and blinks. He listens intently to our song. His eyes soften and his mouth droops as if the song's elegiac loveliness is pouring down his throat like a liquor. Mabel Slater is still chewing her chips and she has transferred her stare from us to the monstrous swell of chest beneath Denzil's battle-jacket. He begins to make a sweeping gesture with his right arm, his fingers plucking at the buttons of his coat. The man in the blue scarf who wants Mabel back and thinks that Denzil marks a broadening of our act, taps Denzil on the shoulder and asks him shortly what lies behind all these gestures.

"I'm the harpist, you ignorant loon," says Denzil. "What kind of an uninformed rodney are you, boy? This is 'David of the White Rock.' It's about a dying harpist. Oh it's a beautiful song, a beautiful song. Beautiful bloody harpist. Pluck away there, boys. Oh I'd like to hear that song when I'm dying." His eyes fill with tears. His face is crazily sad. "Listening to that song you know that whatever you've done is forgiven because it doesn't really matter a damn, that it's always the same either way, that everybody knows that at bottom we're all dirty, daft and dying, that it's the same either way, either way." His voice is ringing with a great and sorrowful wrath. He turns to us, his arms up as if preparing for some kind of supplication. Mrs. Thadwald behind the counter has her scoop at the ready as if waiting to give Denzil a hot tap if he should become troublesome. Then Denzil, with an odd suddenness, turns his face towards the door and there, quite clearly to be seen, his pale face distinct against a background of dark cloth, is Sammy Price who has just arrived.

"Gah, you bloody thing, you!" yells Denzil and he leaps at Sammy and catches him a glancing blow on the face. Sam does not give ground. His lips move very slightly and that is all. Denzil is preparing to give him another and heavier blow. We can see the sombre resolution of his fist as it rises. Odo is crouching back into a recess at my side. Nick, with Peredur closing in behind, taps Denzil on the back and says without force or fuss, "Do that, Dummock, and by God we'll break your neck."

Denzil swings around, his face wide and broken up with distraction. He regains control of himself and tells Sam that he was only joking.

"That's all right," says Sam, not taking his eyes off Denzil as if he finds in the spectacle of this element some sustenance for his whole heart. "It's the battle training. Man to man. Odo told us. You've got to work it off on somebody."

Then Denzil notices Mabel and he bothers us no more for that evening. The flame that stopped dead when the Waaf was snatched away from him down on the beach has now overleaped the barrier and if there were cooking vats fitted on to

Denzil, Teilo's wife would no longer have any difficulty over slow fires. Hirwen Slater is grinning and winking, now at his daughter, now at Denzil, as if he thinks that nature had been shrewder than she normally dares to be in Trelom in throwing these two at each other's head.

Mabel sings again and Denzil volunteers his neck as a full-time knee rest. He chuckles every time her knee rattles him and it is clear from his attitude that he would not object to having this long, willing, palpitating maiden laid across him like a whip.

Mabel and Mr. Slater leave the shop. Denzil and we follow close behind them. Denzil is slow and quite bandy-legged with the fullness of his desire. Wilf gives a low interested groan:

"He'll pick her up and wave her like a flag, honest to God, he will."

We follow them at a fair distance. They enter the lane that will lead them to Trelom. The moon is beginning to give the night a loving glow. Mr. Slater is unsteadier than Denzil and there is a quality of greasy dishwater in the laughter with which he answers the shrill remarks that Mabel is making. Denzil gains on them. Mabel shrieks a laugh, gives her father a sharp slap on the side of the head which makes him reel. She darts ahead along the lane at a speed with which neither of the two men can hope to compete. We can see the detailed working of her magnificent legs in the light of the moon. Mr. Slater is trying to make some sort of explanation to Denzil but now Denzil is staring at the moon and uttering a kind of baying roar like a man whose soul is torn by a conflict between bull and wolf. He stops by a giant oak and beats his fists rapidly against the bark. Then they stumble up a side lane, out of sight and sound.

"Sam," says Nick, "I know you're thinking about this. What's the answer to Denzil?"

"I don't know, Nick. You know about my father and mother, what they were like, what sort of lives they lived. The sight of them made so much wonder in me it'll take years to clear it up. But an answer to Denzil . . . there's one somewhere but at this moment I'm enjoying being here in this lane in the soft light with you boys who are my friends and in a couple of

minutes we are going to start on 'David of the White Rock' again and I'm not going to think about Denzil."

"Good idea, boy," says Peredur.

We walk on in silence.

"From the dirt of our days," says Nick, "an answer grows. It's as slow and certain and quietly satisfying as that. That's the funny sound we hear when we are down at the rock-bottom of silent surprise in the face of what we are; it's the rustling growth of the answers once our little compost of patient mutilations has reached full richness. Perhaps Denzil will do for us all. I don't know whether it'll make us rest any better in the boneyard but that'll be part of the answer too. There's bound to come that particular shade of dark blue in his bruises, that'll make man really sick."

"Turn your back on all such sods," says Iolo. "And Sam too. Forget about your old man, Sam; brood overmuch on him and he'll poison your cup as surely as he poisoned his own. There's no sense in anything except putting your fences up, keeping them firm and high and spitting straight into the eye of any bastard who thinks you're his raw material and tries to feed you into his mixer. You don't fret about a wayward bull. That's what Denzil is. Jump to cover; the bull won't live as long as you. It hasn't got the clinics or the training. There are worse people than him too. Take those manure-minded elements who tried to set Peredur on to butcher me when he came home from the army and there are more people like them on this earth than there are people like Denzil."

Odo is giving Iolo a series of sidelong glances and clucking with his tongue and looking grave as if to say that Iolo would do well to take his head out of the sand and dust his hair on the subject of Denzil.

"That's a fine broad viewpoint you've got there, Iolo, but it's too happy to hold water. Wayward bulls may sometimes frighten hell out of people but they don't take them up thirty feet to do it which is what that unevolved rodney did to me only this morning. Celts, Iolo, are only supposed to have short legs. Their memories are allowed to be longer."

"You all miss the point of this Denzil," says Wilf in an alarmed

whisper; "you boys go describing him as a reactionary and a lout but you are all missing the horrible point. I just saw it myself."

"What is it, boy?"

"Did you see the way he stared at the moon, the glassy witless way he did it? And then did you hear that astonishing racket he made with his mouth?"

"A stupid man trying to hang on to the tail of his coursing libido," says Nick. "That's all. It wasn't uncommon. About the glassy stare, Denzil's eye tends to be dull and there was a sheen of moonlight on it."

"He's a werewolf, a voter who bites his way off the hinge every time he sees a moon, very stooped and putting his teeth in other people's throats, every time he sees a moon or gets sick of being just an ordinary sort of voter. You try to gloss over these things, Nick, as if they couldn't be. I was reading only last week that optimism is the Achilles' Heel of the liberal outlook. You're all heel, Nick, assuredly as that Denzil is all animal. It all fits in. Denzil has been looking since birth for something that will make him feel fully defiantly, exultantly alive, undead. Poetry is full of urges like that, a bright-eyed effort to make death plead guilty and go away. I have a nose for these urges, being so fanatically on the frail and cautious side myself. Study the steps that Denzil has already taken. First he betrays Sam's old man. They say that betrayal is very rich and warming. It must be or so many voters wouldn't take it up as their final hobby. Then he works like a horse as a builder of bridges and roads, builds so many of them he might well be one of that Roman Legion which drove the road over Prophet's Peak, the one the Romans left here for Italy's sake. He's so much like a horse in all ways he must sometimes wonder why his tailor keeps bothering about those buttons on the front and the two legs too many. Then he goes after women. But none of these things is enough. Now he's a werewolf. It wouldn't surprise me to hear of Slater being found crumpled up somewhere tomorrow morning beyond even the power of liver-extract to cure his anæmia and covered all over with Denzil's tooth-marks." Wilf fingers his neck. "They say that once they get

the taste of blood, they've got no place even for sausage and chips. There's no stopping them."

"What he was after tonight," says Nick, "was not Slater's neck or blood. Nothing so decent."

At the next lane, Nick and his friends leave us and we quietly sing on our way back to Trelom. There, at the village hall again, Mrs. Willis gives us sandwiches of dripping and a beaker of cocoa. We ask where Mr. Rawlins is.

"Oh he's very happy, over there, with the toffs," says Mrs. Willis, jerking her finger towards Langtrip Hall. "He went over there for dinner and came back for a few minutes to see that things were all right. He looked like one of those dukes we see at The Dog. I didn't know then he'd been out to dinner with her ladyship and I offered him a sandwich of dripping almost as thick as his body. He nearly fainted. He's very delicate in his ways, is Mr. Rawlins."

We go outside. We climb up on to the high wall which separates us from the graveyard of Trelom Church. The tombstones are sinisterly clear and suggestive in the blue half-light. This leads Wilf, whose mind is still humming through a full octave on the subject of that terrifying look we saw on Denzil's face as he worked off his frustration on the oak tree, into another tortured meadow of reflection. He tells us that once in Carinthia when practically the whole population had got so sick of living on the normal planes, troubled by minority problems, heavy taxes, under-bright loves and over-bright moons, they went over, lock, stock and spare dentures, to being werewolves, all baying at one another and no one among them left human enough to tear the throat out of. Wilf pauses here, waiting for us to get excited enough to know what these people in Carinthia did, to ask him for the climax.

"Well," says Spence. "What did these voters do?"

"They went digging in the graveyards, doing unspeakable things to the dead. It's enough to make anybody fall off a wall." Wilf begins to sway weakly in a way that makes our arms go forth instantly to his support, and we tell Ted Dolan to shut up when he goes pressing Wilf to tell him in detail what he means by the phrase 'unspeakable things'.

"Don't be evasive, boy," he says. "We get enough of that from Rawlins."

Then Spence gives a low whistle and calls our attention to the manor house. The lights of an enormous room in the house's west side have been switched on, illuminating the immaculately barbered hedges of the maze with the marble fountain in their centre. The French windows of the room are thrown open. The scene draws and nourishes our eyes for they see nothing as sumptuously and beautifully toned as this on our own heath. The only french windows we have seen are on the stage of the Library and Institute where they are part of the permanent scenery which has not been changed since the slump and even if the play they are putting on is about submarines the sailors have to step out on to what by the look of the windows is a lawn. Now here we have them in real life, part of the lives of people we have seen and heard, if not understood. A piano is played from inside the room, not well, but for us at that moment every harmony is glossed with magic. Chopin himself fingering his deepest thought of death could have been no better.

"That's Mr. Langtrip," says Ted Dolan. "One morning he heard me having a go on my trumpet and he said he's a bit of a musician himself."

Then out from the windows with a tripping step and casting a smiling, inviting glance behind her comes Mrs. Langtrip. She is wearing a long dress of dusty grey. It is a very delicate dress and looks at moments as if the moonlit air has taken on a momentarily solid texture about her person. Mr. Rawlins follows her and he would not be wearing a more incandescent expression if Mrs. Langtrip had literally been wearing only moonbeams of the thicker kind. He is dancing attendance on her and we can hear, from within the man, sobbing hosannas of gratitude for having been allowed to take part in a scene of such charming, old-world graciousness. Mrs. Langtrip makes her way through the maze, Mr. Rawlins trying shyly not to lose himself in her wake. His senses are laying themselves on a chafing-dish of supernatural contentment. Wilf slips down from the wall, startled and mortified, and urges us, for shame's sake,

to do the same. But Spence says we are sociologists first and gentlemen next and we stay on our perch. Mr. Rawlins and Mrs. Langtrip are now staring with genial fixity at each other over the rim of the fountain, through the silvered spray of its playing waters. They both glance up at the moon and there is a sigh in the very angle at which the head comes away from the neck. Mr. Rawlins pushes his face forward slightly as if to cool some part of his hot advancing fancy in the splashes of the water. She hums part of the slow melody which is being played. We are struck with delight. Ted says this leaves far behind anything we have seen on the stage of the Library and Institute and practically everything we have seen on the screen of The Dog. The moment is full of cream. Not even Wilf, pacing like a corgi at the foot of the wall pulling at our feet as if he were a ringer and we a belfryful of brass, can scoop it all away. We can tell from the glittering smile on Mr. Rawlins' face and the blue velvet of melancholy on which its brilliance rests that for him these minutes, their sounds, perfumes and varnish of desires are but a fragmentary glimpse of something he would have liked always to know.

"He's back in the château," says Sam. "His mind is at ease in the pre-industrial paradise of which he always dreams."

The music ceases. A gruff voice barks the name of Mrs. Langtrip. Mr. Langtrip appears at the french windows smoking a pipe and stretching his arms. He tells them that the unmasked windows are a glaring breach of the blackout. Laughing in a high, innocent, boy-and-girl manner, Mr. Rawlins and Mrs. Langtrip come back into view and vanish into the house. There is a ping of sadness in the air as the lights are switched off.

We climb down from the wall, knowing that we stand a good chance of being pulled down and put clean through the stonework, if Mr. Rawlins should come across us suddenly and guess that we have been examining the gardens of the manor. Within five minutes he is among us. His manner is subdued, his inward chambers luminously happy. He views us all with a strange, small smile, raised eyebrows and forbearing eyes, the mellowed glance of a man who has outgrown the impetuous

intolerance of earlier years. He sits down by our side, keeping up the quizzical smile which sits so oddly on a face which we have grown used to seeing livid with corrective zeal. He speaks to us in a tone that is utterly, uncannily without its normal ration of querulous and dramatic urgency. He seems to have adopted in full the unhurrying, undoubting monotone which we have heard from the Langtrips. He tells us of the progressive tragedy which has robbed life of its assuring urbanities, its lacquer of decent, loyal convictions. He says that in their offensive on the simple mechanical courtesies, the revolutionaries in the France of 1789 and the North in the American Civil War dealt a blow to man's fundamental contentment that will not be healed in our time. We are all trying to fit into the background of this talk by taking quieter sips at our cocoa and Sam is looking as if he is on the point of inquiring about the time of the next tumbril. Mr. Rawlins fingers his tie as if it is a lace cravat and lifts his hand to his mouth as if it holds a glass of mint julep or a sprig of crushed nostalgic lavender. He lets his eyes fall for an instant on the cocoa and the flagstone sandwiches of dripping of which we have just had a second helping and his face clouds with horror. But the quizzical smile fights its way back and he rises from his chair, giving us a punctilious little half-bow. Wilf, fascinated by all this rigmarole, returns the gesture. Mr. Rawlins strolls up and down the hall where the lads are wolfing mugs of tea and sandwiches of corned beef. Time and again we see him on the point of being revolted by some young element trying to force the lip of his cup into the solid wall of food which fills his mouth, but Mr. Rawlins' memory is still in a starlight of ecstasy after his experiences in the manor house. Even when he hears Gomer Jones tell his friends that this new phase of polished restraint on Mr. Rawlins' part is little better than a clumsy ambushade and not to be taken seriously, he is not drawn into handing out any clips.

"Watch out," says Gomer. "At this moment he's acting in the corpse-like way you see because all his blood is in his head. His head is so full with it there is no room inside his skull for him to remember what cannibals we are and to punish us for

it. Give him a couple of minutes of this parading he'll be back in the missionary league and stretching us elements flat on every side."

"Blood in his head?" asks one of the boys who always gather around Gomer when he starts interpreting life in its poker-faced passages.

"What do you mean by that, Gomer?"

"It was the potato-picking this morning. You remember how he was after Selwyn's first two runs down the field. He couldn't straighten up at all. He was walking about like a sealyham, no higher than two and a half feet from the ground at any point. But when the blood starts dropping back down to his feet again, there's going to be a terrible rage in the man. All the things he was unable to say to Selwyn he'll work off on us."

Mr. Rawlins eyes harden a little as he stares at the round black back of Gomer's head, but he gives us a glimpse of that smooth ironical mask again and we can almost hear him mutter that axiom 'Noblesse oblige'.

He returns to sit with us.

"Control, restraint, a regular and dignified rhythm of motive and action, an ironical, yes, even a cynical acceptance of even the most squalid and garish aspects of living, the insistence on garnishing life at all moments with some sprig of thoughtful and gracious courtliness. Golden things, boys, golden things."

The other lads are returning to their ping-pong, dominoes and loud chattering. Wynford Wilkie, Gomer Jones and Ted Dolan have drawn their chairs up just behind Mr. Rawlins' because they think that his talk, in this present mood of unusual, almost spectral calm, will be more rewarding and much easier to follow than the searing outbursts which are the most they have ever had from him. They all have their mouths full of food and in the hall's ascending clatter the sinister champing on the part of these three listeners seems to be the expanding focus for the ears of Mr. Rawlins. We can see his eyes grow less happy, less assured, we watch his face wince, resume its old grey tenseness and we mutter to Ted and his companions either

to get their food swallowed or to move their chairs back out of range. We make no attempt to explain to these elements any of the complexities of Mr. Rawlins' mood. Mr. Rawlins salvages some of the fading guilt upon his mind. He throws his arms up in jerky desperation, in a gesture that comes straight from the griped heart of Mynydd Coch and leaves the hall.

He goes off for a stroll and comes back in half an hour. He is once again serene. We have cleared the hall and the boys are in their tents. He stands by the gate which leads into the camping field. He leans on the top bar and nods his head towards the manor house.

"In that way of life," he tells us softly, "there is something infinitely precious. Don't let the gross and strident demands of your make-shift existence at Mynydd Coch blind you to that. When that kind of calm and stability is thrown to the dogs, this world will be a shorn and shabby thing. Each of us must seek to create the conditions of a fireproof urbanity, show nonchalance to even the most grotesque enormities of living and there are many such, boys, many. What art I've put into my days of utter vexation! What a rub of file on fibre! Death feeds most joyously on the solemn earnestness with which we are committed to living. How well we plan the campaigns of our own desolation. God, to think that through the whole magnificent sky of my being, as I felt it to be time and time and time again in my moments of restful gladness, there have blown no winds greater than a moaning urge to be pious, to instruct and to be safe from contumely. This camp is doing me the world of good. I never really saw the point of the pagan aristocratic ideal before. Tell me about Seneca and Lucretius in the morning, Bosworth. Nonchalance, a perfumed and scient aloofness. To regard even Gomer Jones and Ted Dolan strictly as biological sports or gay lovable imps, never to let anger burn the soul to ash, never to let the ash make its harshening drift into the voice, to accept all."

Mr. Rawlins sounds as if he is willing to carry on in this strain until the dawn. We feel that the pouring out of these words is causing some sort of cleansing effervescence of the

heart and we are all for granting to any voter his fill of whatever brand of moral fruit-salts suits his taste. But about twenty yards away from us an argument has started in the tent of Gomer Jones and Ted Dolan about deafness in animals. If the Governments of this world ever find themselves becoming more silent than they are today they can always turn to Gomer Jones for topics of fresh discussion. This element can find queerer things to start an argument about than even some of those long-distance theologians we keep on tether in Mynydd Coch. Tonight, at a time when you would think the labour of the day, crowned with a stomachful of food, would send them into a sleep like death, here is Gomer, so Ted tells us afterwards, driving everybody daft by asserting that all animals are stone-deaf. Ted testifies to having whistled after dogs and hissed at cats and to having had as good a response from the ears of these animals as if they were mature voters. Gomer says that may be so but that nobody can persuade him that cows can hear anything. He has spent a large part of his first week in the camp watching cows and he is sure that sound means as little to these creatures as Marx does to a mystic. Ted thinks this is as good a time as any to put the hatchet to Gomer as a debater. He says there is one simple test. Gomer dresses, and at the very moment when Mr. Rawlins is telling Bosworth Bowen to give him a summary of Seneca's views on the need for a stoic calm, a bland, sardonic equation of life and death, a total acceptance, Gomer Jones is leading a cow from a corner of the field towards Ted Dolan's tent. A lot of the boys are puzzled to know what Gomer intends to do with the cow but they do not have to wait long. Ted is waiting behind the flap of his tent with his trumpet to his lips and his lung full. Gomer pushes the cow's head through the canvas. Ted lets rip. It is the loudest thing since Jericho and Mr. Rawlins' knees buckle at the gate. The terrified cow canters through the camp tearing up guide ropes and bringing down tents in ruin. Seneca, stoic calm, Mrs. Langtrip, ecstasy, all are forgotten. Mr. Rawlins goes over the gate like a greyhound. "Who was it? Who was it?" he bawls, his voice a mess of tears and hoarseness, "Own up, own up!"

"Jones and Dolan, sir," says a spiteful voice from beneath a pool of canvas.

Mr. Rawlins makes a dash for Ted's tent, but even as he does so we see two forms speeding like light towards the shelter of the glen. Wilf, very upset, follows closely behind Mr. Rawlins as he sets off in pursuit, urging him to remember what he said about biological sports. But Mr. Rawlins' God at that moment is not scientific curiosity. He is back home with a simple-minded, murderous Yaweh.

CHAPTER XII

THE NEXT morning Wilf, Ted and I go up the hill to the farm of Bowen Chidelow. At breakfast Mr. Rawlins told us that we are lucky to have been chosen to work at Mr. Chidelow's farm. We asked why.

"First he has a fine farm with good equipment. You'll learn something about the more intelligent side of farming. Second, he is a reserved man, something of a recluse. At first he objected to the invasion of the village by schoolboys. But now he seems to be won over. I'm putting that trumpeting maniac Dolan in your charge. I'm relying on you, Wilfred, to give him a sense of proportion and keep him out of mischief. I've got Gomer Jones in charge of carrying the chemical closets to the bottom of the field. Now that he has satisfied himself that cows can hear he can feed his mind on even more fundamental marvels of nature."

We find Mr. Chidelow to be as Mr. Rawlins described. We have heard that he is forty-five but he has a slightly stooped body and a face of such complete thoughtfulness he looks more like sixty. With him on the farm is his sister, Amelia, also quiet as a mouse. A tall young man with large shoulders who stares at us curiously and whose eyes and mouth have a suggestion of mental backwardness is present too. This element's name is Vincent Chidelow and he is described as a nephew of the farmer. Also there is Prysor Pratt, the chief hand who has a trim well-kept cottage between Mr. Chidelow's home and the large cowshed which has a spaciousness and variety of equipment that surprise us. And, of course, there is Mabel Slater, the girl we heard singing at Teilo Thadwald's chip-bar. She is employed as a house worker and seems to do little on the farming side.

We spend the morning stooking barley. The binding machine broke down when the barley was being cut and we have to

tie the sheaves. Mr. Chidelow gives Wilf a large roll of twine and his eyes shine with interest and admiration as he watches the earnest intentness with which Wilf computes the exact length to be cut. But he says nothing to us. He smiles at us appreciatingly from time to time, for we work with a will. He takes us back to the house for lunch and we make a cheering sound as Miss Chidelow comes in with a piece of boiled ham the like of which we have not seen for years past, and two dishes of potatoes. The kitchen of the farm, in which we eat, is better furnished than most we have seen. Mr. Chidelow watches the eating of Ted, swift in rhythm, rapturous in tone, with a look of delight, and he reproves Wilf with a friendly wave of the hand when Wilf tries to slow Ted down a little.

"No, no," says Mr. Chidelow to Wilf. "It's excellent to be like that. It's long since I saw such gusto in eating. Compared with your friend here, my nephew Vincent is austere and monkish."

Vincent eats on stolidly, inattentive to what Mr. Chidelow has said. We can see that Vincent is unused to being engaged in talk. When Mr. Chidelow looks at him there is a brief shadow of uneasiness in his eyes but we who have become connoisseurs of pure shadow and now handle the stuff in bulk do not think the disturbance on Mr. Chidelow's face notable.

Half-way through the meal a thunderclap marks the beginning of a fine sweep of rain across the hillside. Mr. Chidelow goes to the window and looks out.

"It's not going to be a short shower," he says. "This is gifted rain, farmer-hating rain. It'll last for hours."

Something in his tone astonishes us. We expected a brusque furious comment on the storm but there is a gentle tolerance instead. We envy Mr. Chidelow and feel that from the existence of this man, rooted, integral and wholesome as it seems to be, we may get some assurance which will be new and warming to us. We envy him the fullness of his provision on this earth, the rich abundance which he has made on his serene hillside, his frank pensiveness, so utterly unlike the terrified shrinking away from thought and inward light which is common in Mynydd Coch. This man, we think, will be a rock, a

solid lump of rational contentment, the opposite of the human caves full of hollow, recurrent and desperate desirings that we have known so far. He will not be like Nick Williams whose ears are always sadly cocked listening for the great music that has drained away from his days; he will not be like Iolo and Pere-dur whose longing for quietness and independence has been kicked and made to look a fool. At ease with life himself, having tested and found good all its means of fulfilment, Mr. Chidelow, we hope, will inject us with part of his own tranquillity. Our throats are dry for it.

It is Mabel Slater who does the waiting on us at table and you would have to look twice through a zoo to find a face more fiercely hungry for the food of every joy than hers. She brings the food in and lets it fall on the table from the height of about a foot, startling the juices out of Wilf with the bang. She glares wickedly at the table; then, as soon as she catches anyone's eye, switches on a gleam of rapture which is clearly mechanical and so independent of any genuine interest or affection towards the person to whom the gleam goes out it nearly makes one giddy. For some reason she takes a fancy to Wilf. He has a diaphanous look about him against the male rough background of that kitchen, and Mabel may feel an impulse to put him in a shawl and set him on a course of milky foods. Every time she has to lean over someone to add to the store on the table she picks Wilf and her breasts rest against the back of his head. Wilf's breath is more rapid, he steams more thickly than the potato tureen and he goes scarlet and dumb every time this happens. For a whole minute after the withdrawal of Mabel's body we get nothing from him but quiet grunts of alarm flecked with ecstasy. Mr. Chidelow watches Mabel with a calm eye in which curiosity is compounded perfectly with contempt. We notice too that the young man Vincent loses something of his passivity at those odd rare moments when he lifts his eyes from his food and finds her in his vision; he says nothing, does not even smile. He gives a violent gulp which we all interpret in different ways. We all feel that the jelly of events is hardening around the person of Mabel.

When lunch is cleared Mr. Chidelow invites us to follow him along a narrow corridor which leads to the front of the house. As we walk through the gloom we notice that the walls of the corridor are covered with pictures of voters as bearded and censorious as any we have ever seen. The sight of them shakes some of the joy we have felt so far in the company of Mr. Chidelow and we explain them away by reference to some relative of his who liked being harassed and made uncertain by such a battery of depressing performers as these boys with beards and frowns. The corridor is full of recesses all heavy with food smells and Ted Dolan whispers to me that for all the hints of asceticism on Mr. Chidelow's brow he seems to be as snug as a rabbit in this warren.

We enter what seems to be the front parlour of the house, a bigger room even than the kitchen, its walls adorned with the same abundant portraits of angry and unbending prophets as the corridor. The furniture in the room strikes us as remarkably solid, for there are few articles in Mynydd Coch meant to outlast a short generation or a stubborn bailiff. The thematic colour of the room is a crimson shade; the dominant material is plush. Both make an ironical chord with the backcloth of forbidding faces in their jet-black frames.

"You can forget about field work for an hour or so," says Mr. Chidelow. "I'll see that your pay is no less for this interruption. Pratt is a good fellow and if there is anything that needs urgently to be done during the afternoon he'll do it."

He closes the door quietly behind us.

"You'll be interested in looking at those books. You boys are scholars, I understand. It isn't often I have the chance of showing my books to anyone or of talking about them. I'll be glad to have you come up at any time to read."

We all say "Thank you, Mr. Chidelow", even Ted who, at this mention of books, is now wishing that the rain will stop and put us back on the barley. We crowd around the bookshelves, beautiful pieces of mahogany and glass, replete with books, the larger number of which are richly bound. We feel more than ever at the sight of them that Mr. Chidelow must be the flawless voter, the one from whom we will get the recipe

which will quieten the nerves of Mynydd Coch and the world around it. Books and fields, the tracts where man achieves the highest and richest points of his significance, must be the only facets of existence that do not startle with hints of destructive and distracted vitality. We study the titles. We can see right-away that Mr. Chidelow is a voter who has done as little light reading as anyone on this hemisphere. Even Wilf and Sam, to whom few concepts are really impenetrable, would need diving helmets for some of these volumes. Most of the books are philosophic and deal with topics like the nature of the soul, sin and hell and we guess that between such activities as ploughing earth on a rainsoaked hillside and delving into the themes that fill these bookshelves Mr. Chidelow must have found the exercise to land him in an ultimate and wantless calm. On such a diet, our smile, if it still lived, would be fixed permanently in a fold at the back of the skull. When we finish examining the library and saying what a sage he must be, we turn around and see that he is standing by the room's broad window, looking down on the patch of country between Tre-lom and Dintle. His eyes are focused on the small grey ruin of the bombed chapel, Saron. His face at that moment with its articulate hint of helpless driving melancholy is not unlike the rainwashed window through which he is staring. He comes out of his silence to find Wilf at his side. Wilf is like that. When anguish of any kind is in session in the being of another, Wilf twitches in restless pity like a dowsers' rod and bids him approach.

"You think about God, too, don't you?" asks Mr. Chidelow.

The way in which he says that disturbs us and makes us itch. This is Mynydd Coch talk. The silken curtains of our optimism about Mr. Chidelow are beginning to wilt and fall. Already we can hear the echoes we know so well burrow through his rock. Wilf fidgets with his hands, not knowing what to reply.

"More than these others, I mean," says Mr. Chidelow.

"Oh he's godly, is Wilf," says Ted Dolan. "He's the best reader we've got in hall in the morning. Mr. Rawlins says that when Wilf gets a bit more volume there'll be nobody to beat him on the psalms, nobody. Wilf's very pure."

"Don't talk daft, Ted," Wilf turns to Chidelow, anxious to say something that will show that he respects the farmer's earnestness. "I think it's a fine thing, thinking about God, especially in a place like this, in the quietness."

"Yes, especially here," says Mr. Chidelow. "Sit down, you boys, anywhere. There are things I'd like to say to somebody. I'm a lonely man and the fields have taken too much of me. See that chapel down there?" We all stand up, say that we see it, and sit down again. "Saron. It was the centre of my life. Without me it would have gone to ruin and closed its doors long since." He returns to the window and stares through the slackening rain at the shattered conventicle. "It was never rich or well supported like the church at Trelom. A half-dozen people were the most we could muster as often as not. Our preacher, when we could afford to keep one, was lucky not to starve. People were surprised that I remained so loyal, for I was sad, unsociable, and might have been expected to remain within my own four walls, making my coin and warning God and men to keep their distance. I kept on going there because I wanted to set other people's lives turning and changing and growing. I wanted to preach. My father was a stupid man. I say those two things very easily but they are great grey cliffs staring at each other in my mind and it is hard to build a bridge of good sense between them. I'll try now because I like the way you boys are looking at me, without malice or laughter. My father was a stupid man, harder than flint, stupid enough to be a bad farmer. He wanted to shut me up, to kill anything in me that would interfere with my work as an upright ploughshare. He wanted his fields to prosper beneath me as if I were a talking bucket of compost. He kept me away from other people, kept me from school, from worship, made a frightened, unlettered idiot of me. He was a poor sort of man, my father. Something had bitten a lump out of him and he bled all over me. I grew into full manhood exactly as he wished me to be, strong, mindless, alone and a good farmer. My farm thrived when the others all around were blinking shut like tired eyes. Then the weed of wanting to overflow into other people's lives, which my father had tried for years to pluck out

and burn, came into sight again. That's why I mention these things to you boys. You'll understand. You approach without distrust, without the scorn of foreknowledge. You'll understand. At a time when my life had finished its pattern, when I should have been hardening into satisfied stone, I became raw and full of growing. I taught myself to read and think. I ploughed that field of books. Wet, heavy soil they were and God knows what the goodness was of the thoughts that sprang from it. But I was still afraid of people, of speech, like a savage coming for the first time to towns. I often despaired of breaking my shyness, my silence, but in that small building down there, Saron, I placed my quiet hope and I kept its fading prospect alive and in use for such time as the passion in me would be ripe for communicating to other men. But mute I stayed. My sister brought my nephew Vincent to live here with us. I thought I might express myself through this lad, use him as my trumpet. But he was a dolt, unfit for school, barely able even now to write his name. Good in the fields, but a dead soul." He pressed his head against the cold glass. "Why should all this daftness have stuck in my brain to fester and ache? Without it I would have been happy, as my father desired I should be; a dead soul but heedless of death, heedless of everything but harvest and toil and the bank manager's smile; a brother bullock for Vincent."

The sky begins to lighten. Mr. Chidelow's head shoots up and from his eyes we can see that despite his assurance that he thinks our minds a good receptacle for his brooding he is embarrassed at having made his reflections audible to us.

"Here I am talking nonsense to you, with so many things to be done. I'm sorry. But I liked having you with me. I find great comfort in the young, the intelligent young. And looking down there at Saron, gutted and useless now, made me sad, made me want to lay my thoughts upon the air. You'll be cursing me for an old nuisance."

"Oh no, sir. Oh no, Mr. Chidelow," says Wilf, jumping up from his armchair to give force to his words. "This is a good rest for us and we like listening to you. And did you come to preach after all?"

Mr. Chidelow has his back to us. He says nothing.

"Did you come to preach after all?" asks Ted Dolan who has been tapping his temple at me to show that he considers Mr. Chidelow to be off the hinge.

"Yes, I did, in a way. Six months ago a tanker ran aground on the rocks in Dintle Bay. We all went down there. We found thirty of the bodies and it was my job to arrange them in a barn alongside the Mariner's Arms. I stayed there all night walking from body to body, shaken like a leaf in wind by the simple ultimate anguish of the spectacle. I walked home under the moon, slow, wise, heavy as time. In my awkward little mind all the reflections that had writhed for an instant and vanished in the course of my long strange autumn moved easily and with perfect calm towards my mouth, and half-way up the hill to my farm I spoke out with the loud absoluteness of a bell some great part of the pity which has always been within me. The next week our pastor at Saron decided he would have a better living in the Forces and left us. The pulpit was empty. I told the members that on the following Sunday I would preach. They groaned, sneered or said 'Well, well,' according to their taste. But I knew surely that on the next Sunday the words that would pour from me would be golden words, charged with such mature beauty and grace as would change this world as my hands had changed this hillside. But on the eve of that Sunday the bomb fell and Saron was destroyed. The rain is stopping. Let's have you now. Back to work." He ushers us to the door. As we reach it he turns once again to look at the window. "That's a terrible thing to happen to a man, too terrible, to have the stone of one's silence, that one has raised with one's bleeding teeth, swing back into place over the wound of all one's loving humanity."

As we walk back through the corridor we feel the odorous gloom to be as much in Mr. Chidelow as in the air and through his half light we hear and see desire lurch and clump with painful pouting lips towards its object, whatever it might be.

Mr. Chidelow remains in his kitchen with some forms and ledgers on the table. We go outside to rejoin Prysor Pratt in the fields. Wilf is running through the back alleys of his

compassion trying to find something adequate to say about the way life is veined with coal-black seams of dumb genius and unspent love, dirtied loveliness. We can almost hear his mind singing with the fullness of his sympathy.

"And he kept the place going all those years," says Ted Dolan, aiming with a lunge of the leg at what he thinks is the heart of the matter, "and all for that. These bomb-droppers!"

Wilf resumes the interminable cutting of twine with raw fingers for the felled barley. We make good progress and only a small corner remains to be treated when Mabel comes along with a pail of tea and a ladle. We rush upon it; only Wilf hangs demurely back. Him she serves personally, lifting the loaded ladle to his lips, looking as challenging as Carmen, to the delight of Ted Dolan who is always a leading spokesman for carnality.

Pryor sits down to have a cigarette and we form a circle around him.

"Been talking with the old man?" he asks.

"We had a bit of a chat."

"He's a funny one. A beautiful farmer, but funny."

"He sounded jingles to me," says Ted.

"Was he on about Saron?"

"Something like that."

"A sod for religion, old Chidelow, no question of it," says Pryor. "Why, God only knows. He's got a stockingful of cash. But we all want something. Take me. Do you know what I'm a sod for?"

"Tobacco," says Spence, noting the fierce drags that Pryor is making at his cigarette.

"No. Those big Brazil nuts, those big meaty ones. Since the war they're scarce, and without them I've got a tombstone inside me. So I want a ship, a sailing ship, like my old man used to sail. And once I get such a ship I'll be off to Rio and I'll come back with the greatest bloody load of those Brazil nuts you've ever seen."

"Good luck to you, Pryor," I say, but thinking that Chidelow's farm would be better off for a more orthodox line in desires all round.

"Nuts are something ordinary and proper," says Prysor. "To feel the sweet simple freshness of them between the teeth, that's harmless, good. But God and preaching, that's bad. The old man wanted Vincent to be a preacher. Nearly drove him mad. Kept him to his books while Vincent was kicking and screaming. Why didn't old Chidelow go up to London a couple of times a year and work it all off on women? Never looked at them, not with all the coin that he's got. Wish I had it. Next to Brazil nuts, give me women. One night I was coming home from Dintle, very late and a bit slewed with ale. A concert with the Buffs, that's what I'd been to. This was a few years back. I saw a light in that chapel, Saron. I peeped in, thinking the ale had filled me with visions and lights. It might have been visions. God knows what they put in the ale since Mr. Gladstone went. I peeped in. There was that poor Vincent up in the pulpit, looking trembly and daft. Chidelow was below, looking daft as well and waving his arms at Vincent urging him to become a preacher and fill the place with words. I cleared off. Such things are not for the eyes of a man who's just been having a nice time with the Buffs. Why the hell can't a man stick to sweet simple things like Brazil nuts and women?" Prysor Pratt glances sidelong at Mabel who is swilling out the pail. "Both those things are very nice."

"But I still don't see this thing plain," says Wilf. "A bomb falls on Saron. All right. That's a pity. It was the place where Mr. Chidelow was going to preach and when he turns up there on the Sunday, full of words that have ripened into a sounding beauty over the silent years, he finds no place to speak. But Saron is only one place. This county is crammed with chapels and I'm sure that in most of them the voters would be delighted to listen to a man like Mr. Chidelow who not only believes in God but would be willing to pay his own bus fare going from place to place saying so."

"It wouldn't be the same. Saron has always been the light at the end of his tunnel. We never understand how dark it is in other people's tunnels. If we did we'd all carry lamps. Desires are just like fruit. There is a time to pluck them. Leave them and they fall quiet and rot. The rot fertilises

in turn. There's something bubbling up in the old man now."

"But there can't be any desire great enough to succeed a thing so glorious as the wish to reveal one's vision of God, the vision that has grown from the marrow of one's bones."

"God knows," says Pryor. "I was an objector in the first war. That's when I switched over to farm work. My thoughts were deep about that time. Gaol and hunger made me turn to simpler grails than a world at peace. Chidelow was very good to me. I wish he could find the second half of himself. There's nothing on a farm as queer as the things that bubble up inside a voter and make him go off like gas. Everything we do seems to be just a shorthand way of saying something else and we never seem to put our finger on the something else. Perhaps the old man only dreamed that he had enough words harnessed inside him to make a sermon in Saron. Perhaps if it had come to the test he would have stood there as dumb and daft and sorrowful as ever. Perhaps we never see the real beauty of the tile that catches us one across the neck. I'll tell you another thing I saw down at that bombed ruin. That was a moony night too and I had been to another concert with the Buffs at Dintle. I heard a slight noise coming from the chapel and I climbed over the rubble to take a look. Mr. Chidelow was up there in the half-destroyed pulpit. He had his face staring right up at the moon, his arms were thrown wide open and there was a look on his face, a look that was sick and angry in turns, like you see on the face of a kid who's been given something, then sees it taken away. This time he saw that I was there. He came down and said he was making a fire-watch patrol, he had seen something odd in the chapel and had come along to see. I'll never forget that look on his face, the kind of look a seed must wear when it's deciding whether to poke through the dirt to where we are waiting for it with our knives and hungers. One way and the other I've seen a lot of things coming back from the Buffs at Dintle. . . . God knows. . . . Everything we do, a kind of backside of something else we are afraid or too daft to say." Pryor taps Wilf on the leg. "You look the sort of boy who'd be full of wishes left too long upon

the branch. Don't let the grass grow too long in the meadow of your silences, boy. Don't let whispers slither about like rats in your drain. Shout out. That keeps you cosy, wrapped in your own echoes, and it lets people know you're alive. Look at that Mabel, if she's not saying welcome to you, my name isn't Pratt. She likes the studious, delicate look of you. All she gets around here are slow, heavy-footed elements who go to as much trouble having a thought as a woman goes to having a baby."

"Oh no, Mr. Pratt. I'd never be able to do anything like that. I'm Mr. Rawlins' chief helper down at the camp. I've got to set an example."

We rise. The sky darkens with a purple, rain-filled bloom. "She's a damned nuisance about here," says Prysor. "She was after me at one time. I think her old man was egging her on to get me into some kind of trouble that would persuade old Chidelow to give me the poke. But I'm pure and often slow to take a hint and both those things are a help when you are out to keep in with a pious old element like Bowen Chidelow. All my tenderness is worked off fiddling with those twenty cows in the big byre over there and any strength I've got left over from doing most of the heavy graft on this farm goes into being a tenor with the Sons of Dintle, a concert-party we run with the Buffs. Without those distractions the odds are that Mabel would have burned me brown by now." Prysor looks at the sky. "Look at that blacky blueness. If you boys have boats have them ready tonight."

CHAPTER XIII

WE SPEND three days at Bowen Chidelow's farm and each of the three evenings we spend in his study listening to him talk to us about his fields, his soul and his strange pattern of quiet desires. We are all drawn to and delighted by his wise gentleness and we are all sad that the wishes of such a man should have found no great and glorious climax, no proper gateway to serenity. We can hear his thoughts moving slippered and polite inside him, in a cold empty space full of tricky and maddening echoes. We all wonder what happiness this man will ever find for himself, of what will be its texture.

Mabel's stare at Wilf becomes no less fierce and obsessive and about that too we speculate.

On the Friday we go to one of the large estates being worked by the Agricultural Committee. We are taken to a potato field by Selwyn who, since we saw him last, seems to have found no hobby to take the place of near-murder.

Into the next field comes a file of women in long, unlovely blue and white drill dresses. We cannot decide what they are. Wilf says he cannot help feeling there is something sinister about the look of them but that sort of reflection is normal to Wilf and we pay no attention to it. There are two elements in charge of the women who look so grim we think joy has now thought it over and given in at last. Gomer Jones takes only a few minutes putting two and two together and finding his brain full of other figures. He spreads the tale that these women are part of a vast canteen service set up to keep moist and mellow just such elements as we who are helping with the county's harvest and that soon we shall see the ranges and urns being set up in the field next door and chips and tea being passed over the hedge even better than those we get from Teilo Thadwald. We see no sign of urns. The two grim voters organise the women into a long line right across the field which

is full of standing flax and they begin pulling at the tall stems. We begin crowding towards the hedge to have a chat and exchange views about life and the harvest with these new workers, for there is something in the sight of people in uniforms which always inspires us to sympathy and interest, as if the universe has them in some way by the hair and we wish to ease the grip. Mr. Rawlins gives a shout, heads us off and with a face almost as cheerless as those of the two organisers in the next field, he drives us into a corner and takes off his hat and puts his hands on his hips preparing himself for a speech. He says by way of an opening sally that he would like to obtain chips off Gomer Jones' imagination for submission to a vet. Selwyn shouts over to him to stop all this chatter and to get us back to the furrow. He wants ten tons of potatoes for the lorry before tea-time. Mr. Rawlins gives Selwyn a sharper and more critical glance than we have seen him give the driver before and we expect to hear him say something vulgarly acid like telling Selwyn to find his own business and either to mind it or spread it over the field. But he turns again towards us. Those women, he tells us, in a voice that is snow-white with horror, are female prisoners from the County's main gaol. As he says that, he expects our mood to answer his, to see our mouths droop and our voices to utter an impressed moan. But we feel none of his surprise or revulsion. We have known many a nice, friendly, civilised voter marched off to the County Keep for trying to eke out his dole by running his fingers through the massive tip that rises on the mountain top to the east of Mynydd Coch and until we get lenses as expensive and oddly cut as those worn by the Stipendiary we shall see no trace of crime in those boys. We are, says Mr. Rawlins, to exchange not even a glance with these women. To him they are clearly unclean, outcast, and we feel a sudden flare of anger at him for the ease with which he allows himself to limit his sense of community so ruthlessly. He sees that thought in our faces and is instantly sorry to have evoked it. He says it is not because he considers these women to be despicable, alien to ourselves. No, no. He is eager to regard them as kinsfolk, to hasten their regeneration, to hail them as flesh to our flesh. But it would be

a terrible humiliation for them to be recognised and hailed in their present state, would simply induce a fatal hardening of spirit which would destroy the fine work now being done by the penal authorities. We cast our eyes over at the two supervisors who are now looking even more as if they are calling around as agents to ask us to change to death at the beginning of the next rationing period. We feel that Mr. Rawlins' present vein of talk beats anything we have heard from him so far for sheer nitrogen-content and it makes as little sense to our ears as the rustle of the oaks that flank the field on its southern edge.

We return to our places, a fair distance between us and the hedge. Then Gomer tells us he recognises one of the prisoners. Several boys crowd around him, glad to know Gomer and expecting big things from this discovery. She is a woman about thirty, broad-faced, brighter about the eyes and mouth than most of her companions. She lives in the same row as Gomer, Bessemer Crescent, and is called Mrs. Blanders. She lost her husband early in the war and, now and then, on evenings when beer and grief within her fuse into a spearhead of witless rage she starts to fight and to swear with a crazy fullness that has a cosmic sound to any thoughtful hearer. Then she gets put away in the County Keep and her one child, a daughter, has now been recommended for adoption by strangers because her mother is so frequently in court and gaol and the newspapers. We can see her looking towards us, friendly and a little forlorn. We smile back and Gomer edges towards the field in which she is working. She, in turn, approaches her side of the edge. There is no attempt at concealment in her movements. It is as if she finds some kind of tidal tug in our cordiality which she cannot resist. The warders are deep in talk at the top of the field with an official of the Agricultural Committee. Gomer finds a fair gap in the brambles through which he can talk to Mrs. Blanders. He hands her a half-bag of liquorice allsorts bought at Dintle the night before. She is almost in tears with gratitude and can hardly speak when Gomer asks her eagerly to tell him all about gaol and what her companions are in for. There is a shout from one of the

warders and they and Mr. Rawlins converge on our part of the hedge and silence and isolation are restored, broken only by Gomer who squeals with pain as Mr. Rawlins takes him by the ear and leads him off. He orders Gomer back to the village hall with instructions to go to Mrs. Willis and demand to be given all the most repellent jobs in camp that still remain to be done. Gomer, after a day on the closets, smiles, pats his ear back into place and strolls back to our headquarters. We work on, glancing over once in a while, ignoring all Mr. Rawlins' hot and vindictive protests, at the figure of Mrs. Blanders, the stooped bewilderment of her shoulders, the swift willingness of her hands as they tear at the tall tough flax stems.

At five, we go back to the hall. As we are finishing our tea, Mr. Mathews the Moloch strides in. With him is a small phalanx of assistants among whom we see Denzil Dummock. Mathews is looking very stern but there is a grin on Denzil's face as wide as his chest. Mr. Rawlins goes on to Mr. Mathews and there is a portentous exchange of whispers between these two. From the pleased acquiescent look on Mr. Rawlins' face we can see that whatever Mr. Mathews may be up to, Mr. Rawlins is privy to it, behind it, for it. He tells us that for the duration of the talk we are to have from Mr. Mathews we will stay at our places by the tables. I am sitting quite near to Mr. Rawlins and I can hear him say:

"I quite agree, Colonel. Very educational. It gets to the crux of the matter, the raw essentials. Teaches firmness, stability. Key ideals, without doubt."

I turn to Gomer Jones who, as part of his punishment for having tried to defile the penal code with sociability, is helping to clear the tables.

"What's up, Gomer? What are these boys plotting now?"

"Don't know for sure," says Gomer. "They are in here most of this afternoon, Mathews, Dummock and a few other voters, and they did a series of little jobs with hammers and chisels and screwdrivers inside the hall. I wanted to watch. I'm interested in crafts and those slop buckets were getting very heavy but they drove me out. I don't trust any of them. Frankly," he says, turning to Wilf who has just shoved his ear

between us, "frankly, I think it's just as well that we're staying next door to the graveyard. See what I mean, Wilf?"

"No. What do you mean, Gomer?"

"Silence!" says Mr. Rawlins, in a suspenseful, windy voice, like a high priest. He introduces Mr. Mathews.

Mr. Mathews is wearing a bland smile edged with cunning which is not natural to his face. It seems to fill the whole air around us with jagged and disquieting possibilities. He tells us that he is taking advantage of our presence in Trelom to give the youth of Mynydd Coch an insight into the character-training which is now such a large part of military preparedness. We feel worried as we always do when we see such voters as Mathews fingering the mould into which he thinks we shall be poured.

"You'll learn a lot from books," he says, "but for the final answers, go to Life."

We now think he is going to get us up from the benches and march us down to the glen for the Mathews Course in Simple Disruption, but all he does is to look even craftier and say:

"Life is full of fools. When you leave the shelter of your home and school, you will be deceived a thousand times, sold pups, gold mines and gold bricks that don't exist. That's part of a healthy competitive system. You've got to learn to be constantly alert, not to be a booby."

We all lean forward. We are interested in this talk. Any minute now, we think, Mr. Mathews will say that he is going to challenge us to expose the foolery which has allowed him to own a couple of mountains and most of Mynydd Coch north of the main drain.

"The enemy is subtle," he goes on. "Don't expect him to fight fair. The Boy Scout rules are all right when you're dealing with your own folk who'll appreciate such treatment, but guile and cunning become the order of the day when you're fighting for your native land."

He breaks off and there is some whispering between him and Denzil Dummock. I hear Mr. Mathews say that he wants someone whose senses are razor-keen, always on the job.

"What about him?" asks Denzil maliciously, pointing to Sam Price. "He looks a cheeky young rodney. Give him a basinful."

"Too sullen and unco-operative," says Mr. Rawlins. "Very touchy and unhelpful. His father was some kind of objector too."

"Who then, who?"

"My camp leader, Wilfred, there, is an obvious choice. He's cautious in the extreme. Nothing of the booby about him."

"That's the boy for us," says Mr. Mathews, nodding at Wilf, who is now staring blankly at the wall, his thoughts far from the hall, his mind probably absorbed in some problem of the historical process between which and Mathews the Moloch he sees no link. Or perhaps he is pondering on the personality of Mabel Slater. He is very surprised when Mr. Rawlins advances, taps him on the shoulders and gestures him to rise. As Wilf goes to stand by the side of Mr. Mathews, Mr. Rawlins mutters:

"Now don't forget what was just said, Wilfred. There is no kind of guile or underhandedness to which the enemy will not stoop. Abandon your normal candour. Be cunning and cagey. Suspect everything, everyone."

Wilf is in a fog. He looks over at us and even at Ted Dolan to see if we can give him any help in making head or tail out of these manoeuvres or the hoarse, urgent directives that are coming right into his ear from Mr. Rawlins who flashes a smile at Mr. Mathews and at Denzil which we take to be most unpromising in the context.

"This hall," says Mr. Mathews, "is an enemy town. This boy," pointing at Wilf, "is one of our officers going around on a preliminary inspection."

Then begins one of the most horrible ten minutes that even Wilf in the course of his quaking days has ever known. We soon see what Mathews and Denzil have been doing with the tools that Gomer mentioned. They have been fixing up a series of small booby traps, harmless in their real explosive force but alarming in the amount of noise they make. First of all Mr. Mathews tells Wilf to see if there is a Jap hidden in the piano.

Wilf is going to say that he has already looked inside that piano, when he first arrived, that it is so dark and dirty as to be a disgrace to Trelom and a Christian village hall and not even a Jap would go curling up in it. But Mr. Rawlins tells him peremptorily to get on with it and stop quibbling. We all make a low buzzing sound to caution Wilf that he should approach the piano with care. But apart from having no idea of what is intended by Mathews and being in a mood where his natural innocence and trust are at a peak, he sees the piano as nothing but a piano and confidently pulls up the lid. The ensuing smoke and racket make him reel. He walks away from the piano half-senseless and from that moment on he is a birthday gift to the enemy, the Messiah of this world's many boobies, their pathfinder. Guile and cunning have never done worse business on this planet than they do in Wilf for these moments. He lurches from point to point, still conscious enough to hear the voice and heed the instructions of Mathews who directs delightedly from one snare to the next, fascinated by the details of this bijou crucifixion. Everything that Wilf touches in the whole building, a marmalade pot on the table, a picture on the wall, a poker by the fire, the leg of a chair, has been wired for evil, and we become so impressed by the spectacle of the poor element staggering from pillar to post, with everything he touches turning to noise and smoke, we shrink back from the range of his hands in case Mathews has wired our pates for detonation as part of the course. The demonstration ends with Mr. Mathews pointing to a snow-white roller towel which is hanging on the wall near the door which leads to the ante-room. This towel is a brand-new feature of the hall's interior. It has clearly been placed there during the day and it is so much snowier than anything else in the hall we are sure that it will serve to put Wilf, even in his present stupefied state, on guard and prompt him to tell Mr. Mathews what to do with it whether he needs wiping or not.

"There's surely a Fritz using that for cover," says Mr. Mathews, sounding more and more like doom's rich uncle. "Whip it aside boy, whip it aside."

And Wilf, for all the world as if his whole life was matured

to the single end of looking for Germans in towels, whips it aside. We get the biggest bang of the whole horrifying tour.

Mr. Rawlins rescues Wilf who is now looking like the last act at Gaza and takes him out to the kitchen to give him a cup of tea. Mr. Mathews is waiting to finish his lecture, to draw the moral of how fatal such ineptitude as Wilf's would be on the field of combat. He cannot proceed because Denzil Dummock is standing in the middle of the hall, roaring, his head flung back, his mouth a broad cave of skirling, uncontrollable laughter, the tears of delight showering down his face. We can see that Wilf's progress from mishap to mishap has provided this element with some kind of satisfying emblem of man's stumbling from age to age. We decide that our passivity in the chairs has gone far enough. We nod at Ted. Ted nods at Gomer Jones. Gomer gestures to Wynford Wilkie. Gomer slips out, keeping close to the wall. He returns with a bucketful of stale refuse. He takes it to the base of the wall just below the niche in which the ringed ropes rest. Wynford climbs like a squirrel. Gomer hands up the bucket which Wynford, stretching down and appearing to hang on to the niche by his toecap, manages to seize. He swings through the air with beautiful precision, and as Mr. Mathews is still staring goggle-eyed at this intervention, Gomer and a dozen other boys bawl 'Achtung' and Wynford empties the bucket over Denzil's head. He lands neatly near the piano. Denzil wipes his face. His expression is obscene and sickening with the fullness of its raging spite. Between Wilf's look and his, all in the space of a minute, we feel that man can take things too far, can ornament with too baroque a hand the scroll of his confusions. With a bellow Denzil starts after Wynford. Sam sticks out a foot and Denzil's stomach makes the whole of Trelom tremble as it lands on the floor. He looks at Sam as if he is now going to mark the climax of whatever frenzy he had felt that night in the chip-bar at Dintle, but this event will be the ether he has long sought to pour over the pale sleepless years behind him, that he is now going to do things to Sam which will fill him with such blood-smooth joy as will rid him even of the need for Mabel Slater. But Mr. Rawlins and Mr. Mathews saying in their light and

leaden voices respectively what a magnificent demonstration it has been, close in on Denzil, take him by the shoulder and compliment him on having taken Wynford's ingenious and timely jape so well.

"For one's native land," says Mr. Mathews, a saluting gun on each tonsil, "guile and cunning, without limit, without qualification, are not merely licit but commendable. The antic with the waste-bucket was a valuable rider to our own little exposition."

Wilf, his whole being shaped like a sob, lopes off down the lane that leads to Dintle. We offer to accompany him, to nourish his lyric vein by calling Mathews and Denzil bastards in turn but he says that solitude and the embracing nearness of the storm over Dintle Bay are the only things that will ease and sublimate his resentment.

When we are rid of the military we have a concert in the village hall. Mrs. Langtrip attends and sits by Mr. Rawlins' side, enrapturing him as she taps his hand in appreciation of the various turns. It is odd for us to study her face as she turns to stare at us from time to time, as if we are furred, unfamiliar things, bizarre, unassimilable to the stomach of her existence.

The most inscrutable event of the evening is a turn by Hugo Bateman, a sketch in which he takes all the parts except one. We admire Hugo. He has a voice like a bugle, a rubbery face which can fill you with agony or glee. He is adaptable in his expression to any kind of crisis under the moon except having to put up with Hugo Bateman. In this sketch he is a whole platoon of voters out in North Africa besieged and very likely to be wiped out. Hugo takes the parts of two officers, eight men, and so many bullets he is nerve-racking. For the officers he puts on the kind of voice and tone he hears on the wireless bulletin. For the men he talks in the manner of boys like Wynford Wilkie who are in the very cellarage of the Celtic fringe and doomed to stay there because their vowels are too broad to get them through the door. They are all killed and only the captain remains. The captain is, of course, Hugo. He is hit and dying. Gomer Jones comes on and says that he has just heard that Mynydd Coch has now passed the savings target

and Hugo, shouting so loud we can almost see death ducking for cover, says he dies in peace. He adds that he has always felt that Mynydd Coch is a wasteful, improvident sort of place with a very scaly record in war-efforts and it gives him a calm happiness even at this hour to hear the news that Gomer has just brought about the target. He dies. Gomer takes a Union Jack from his pocket and puts it over Hugo and he looks at us as if to say he is sorry not to have been able to do that sooner. Hugo gets up and apologises that realism made it impossible for him to do the little job with the flag which he had to entrust to Gomer and he hopes that Gomer did not let down the standard of the sketch as a whole.

The next turn is Gomer himself. He sings like a lark but, funnily for a boy who has so few inhibitions trousers look freakish on him, he is shy about his singing. He will not stand on the stage. He asks Mr. Rawlins to play 'Kiss Me Again'. Gomer makes the title sound as rough as a directive from Hengest to Horsa and Mr. Rawlins giggles at Mrs. Langtrip as he walks to the piano. Gomer goes to stand out in the kitchen and pours forth the rich silver from his throat. We at the time are helping Alice Maude with the sandwiches and it is spirit-forming to stand there in that chill austere ante-room slicing bread and meat and hearing that glory of sentimental sound pouring from the dark, rapt, Italianate skull of Gomer, standing in his far embarrassed corner. Alice Maude is entranced and tearful. She tells us that she is bitterly sorry she found so many extra loads for Gomer to carry during the afternoon punishment fatigue. That was no work for an angel, she says, and in the sweating joy and forgiveness of her mood she lets many sandwiches slip through her fingers without a trace of spam between the slices.

We go to our tents, pleased. Wilf comes back about eleven, furtive with contrition at arriving back so late and still distracted by his experience with Mathews to a point of being half-dazed and in need of a reminder now and then why the roof over his head is so low and made of canvas. At midnight the storm breaks. In half an hour we have to send a messenger up to the village hall to report to Mr. Rawlins that

the tents are rapidly becoming unlivable. He replies that if we yield to a little thing like a shower we will be a laughing-stock for Trelom, an object of contumely for such men as Mr. Mathews and Mr. Langtrip. We answer that there is nothing that would so benefit Trelom as a good laugh and we are willing to qualify as clowns if it means not drowning. He tells us to hang on. Fifteen minutes later we have little to hang on to. We salvage what blankets we can and march up to the village hall, an eerie sight as we sludge up the path looking like soaked troglodytes with ground sheets over our heads. All of us go except Wilf. He stays amidst the dripping rain of the tent. He says he has already failed Mr. Rawlins disastrously enough for one day in having consented to be the booby for every trap devised by Mr. Mathews and the least he can do now is to act as a true captain and go down with his tent.

We knock at the locked door of the hall.

"Another messenger?" shouts Mr. Rawlins angrily from inside. "Firmness, stability. They are the key words. Tell them they are not going through one half of what those boys are going through out there. Go back and tell them to count their blessings."

We continue our banging, in no mood to start a debate. Mr. Rawlins gives in and comes to the door in his grey dressing-gown, a book in his hand. He gasps and groans at the sight of us. We file in past him and settle down on the floor. He picks his way through us, his foot poised thoughtfully over this face and that. He sits on his bunk, his knees up, his eyes full of wonder and climactic despair. He moans and asks himself where, where are peace and grace. We answer him in low guesses and try to sleep.

"Get Wilf," says Mr. Rawlins. "Tell him that he, like me, has endured enough."

CHAPTER XIV

TRELOM VIBRATES the next day. We can feel the whole village rubbing its eyes and preparing to squeal, although it is a Sunday, a day on which Trelom normally slips into a soundless torpor. We see groups of villagers talking importantly one to another and Reynolds, the policeman, swells himself out as he marches back and forth in front of the village hall. He has his hand on his notebook and pencils diligently from time to time. Mr. Rawlins goes up to him and asks him what is amiss. Reynolds tells him and Mr. Rawlins goes a creamy colour which is all the ghostlier for being seen against the deep virile blue of the policeman's uniform, showing that Mr. Reynolds' news has upset him. Mr. Rawlins has reason to be upset. He has been having a chat with Mr. and Mrs. Langtrip about religious observance and its role in contemporary society. They have persuaded him, despite his own nonconformist background, that the great seam of dry rot which anyone can see has developed right across the blank brutal face of modern life started when a broad-bodied Established Church broke up into its separate entrails. Therefore, he says, he is going to revive for the period of our stay at the farming camp the institution of a compulsory and corporate church-attendance which will have all our souls sweet as saccharine and ready for toil on Monday morning.

From the moment breakfast ended we have been lining up at the half a dozen bowls at the back of the hall giving ourselves an extra coat of lather, and either putting on our Sunday best suits or scraping our way with knives back down to the material of the ones we have been using in the fields. Mr. Rawlins says he wants us as spick and span as possible. We are to march as a body to the church and we are to touch cap or forelock to Mr. Langtrip who will be stationed somewhere near

the church door, thumbing his nose at John Bull and Cromwell whenever he will not be collecting tributes from us. This is another bit of ritual which Mr. Rawlins wishes to see embraced as part of the fight against dry rot, this act of obeisance before the squire. He says it is disgusting how most of the villagers, and we for that matter, slop about Trelom treating Mr. Langtrip as if he were just another ordinary citizen, bruising the nourishing fruit of traditional assurance. We agree to do as he asks, anxious to know in what kind of broth he and we will find ourselves if we consent to co-operate in thickening the mixture, anxious too to know what kind of expression will dawn on the face of Mr. Langtrip when he looks upon the forthcoming march-past of pliant prolies. Mr. Rawlins has told us that it is fortunate that since the bomb landed on that chapel Saron, there is now only one place of worship in Trelom and there will be no real loophole for dissenters, save perhaps for Catholics whose gravedogmatism Mr. Rawlins respects even though he has been a Protestant since birth and he read Foxe's Book of Martyrs through holes in his rubber comforter. And he might too make a reservation in the case of outright atheists who tend to be awkwardly legalistic in these matters. We have to get a written note from home to say we are such. Ted Dolan asks how are Lookers fixed because they have no regular place of worship. They just Look and Wait and put hope through any mincer that comes handy. Mr. Rawlins asks Ted to give him a sketch of the Lookers' creed so that he can judge whether Ted should or not be granted exemption. Ted explains that the Lookers think there is no hope for man, the whole species being a corrupt lot of rodneys, that doom is whizzing towards them with a fierce light in its eye and an armful of destructive paraphernalia that will take the crease out of man's trousers for evermore.

"I don't see how that clashes really with the broad principles of the Church," says Mr. Rawlins. "All religions are inherently apocalyptic, the more so when they make their gentle demands for a universal love, but that thought will be too subtle for you, no doubt." He pats Ted sympathetically. "There is something so intimately and urgently apocalyptic about

yours it must be due to the years of prophesying which the people of Mynydd Coch have been doing on football pools. Fall in, Dolan, and for goodness' sake, put that wretched trumpet away. Why do you keep the thing slung around your neck like that?"

"As the son of a Looker," says Ted, "I might get advance notice of the final crumble, the day when man will really get his cards from the manager of the Universal Exchange. The trumpet will be handy to give warning to the other voters to duck."

"That's obliging of you, Dolan. From what little I've heard of your performance on the instrument, once the people have heard the first few notes they won't care what happens after that."

We all line up, even Sam who seems to have become more accommodating since he came out to the fields. Sam could easily get out of the parade because he has a letter on him from his father who is now dead which says that his son, Sam Price, is not to be asked to take part in any religious ceremony or to express belief in God until he is sixty-five, the age at which we are pensioned and have enough time to give adequate thought to such deep and generalised issues. Sam says now his old man might have been too much of an isolationist and moreover he sees so little chance of peace in his lifetime it will be a miracle if he gets to sixty-five with still enough skin around his skull to make up his mind about anything.

While we wait for the signal from Mr. Rawlins to file out in an orderly way from the yard of the village hall we give the cooks a hand in piling up the soaked pallets and blankets in the kitchen to dry. At first sight it looks as if Mrs. Willis and her companions are barricading themselves in, and with Mr. Rawlins outside coursing up and down the yard straightening the line in his lean navy-blue suit and prim traditionalist mood we do not blame them.

But nothing turns out as planned. First, a few seconds after Mr. Langtrip, in a black suit and black cravat which gives him the appearance of an actor, has taken his stand alongside the church door, the policeman bustles up to him, speaks a message

and Mr. Langtrip, waving an apology to Mr. Rawlins, hurries off.

"Never mind," says Mr. Rawlins. "There will be other occasions on which we can pay our collective respect to Mr. Langtrip. This morning we shall concentrate on the strictly religious aspect of the parade."

We begin moving. We are arranged in twos, Wilf and Bosworth Bowen in the van. As we swing into the lane there is a clatter of nailed boots and voices from the main road and the whole contingent of Home Guards from Mynydd Coch come into view making towards the church, with Denzil at their side shouting orders and Mr. Mathews the Moloch hurrying ahead to get our procession out of the way. Mr. Mathews explains to Mr. Rawlins that his men are the senior organisation and as we, as voluntary farming campers, have no recognised place in the defence-organisation, they have precedence on all occasions. Mr. Rawlins smiles and bows Mr. Mathews forward as deferentially as a floor-walker. The Home Guards troop in. We see our friends Iolo and Peredur among them. They look pleased, as if this devotional act strikes them as refreshing. There are many villagers present, especially women. By the time they have all found seats a sidesman comes out and says that he is to present the kind wishes of the vicar and to apologise for the fact that there are no more pews. Wynford Wilkie, who lives in one of the most blandly unbelieving areas of Mynydd Coch and who as far as we know has turned up in chapels and churches only as a performer in such events as missionary sketches and bits of boyish burglary, says that this is too bad and that it is a shame and a defeat if elements like ourselves are going to be cheated out of the chance to worship just because great oafs like Denzil Dummock are going to fill our temples on this ad hoc military basis. Mr. Rawlins nods and smiles as if pleased to hear Wynford speaking up for the faith. Gomer Jones asks how it would be if each of us could go in and sit on the knee of a Home Guard, to show Mr. Langtrip how much in earnest we all are about this and to persuade the vicar to include in his prayers our memo that the County Agricultural Committee should be more liberal in its view of workers under

eighteen and give puberty its due. Mr. Rawlins looks at Gomer and says no, looking as if he would not even wish that on a Home Guard. He dismisses us and says quietly that he is enough of a pantheist to think that in the fields we can have thoughts as godly and clean as those we would have had sitting at the vicar's feet.

"There is a book who runs may read," he says, quoting one of the most obscure hymns we sing at school.

We stroll over to Dintle and drink teas in the café of Teilo Thadwald which is open on a Sunday. Nick Williams is there and for the first few sips Nick is in a disgruntled mood because earlier in the morning he had tried without success to get Iolo and Peredur to protest against the church parade.

"But those two beauties are in a sick recessive mood," says Nick. "They start out by being in flight from the interference of employer and Calvinistic censor. Then they long for the quietness of fields and fall hook, line and sinker for any kind of obscurantism that draws a shirt of deadening cottonwool over the clatter of the spirit in its quest for fullness. It wouldn't surprise me if they rounded off this interlude by getting Denzil Dummock to twist them into hoops for dispatch to the Dalai Lama as prayer-wheels. They are out on a strange muted highway."

We ask Nick why Reynolds the policeman should have been marching about Trelom looking so swollen and ominous as from the early morning. Nick knows and tells us casually, clearly less interested in Reynolds than in the wounding horns of Iolo Vaughan's dilemma. The night before, he tells us, Mabel Slater was assaulted in a barn near the Chidelow farm and left unconscious. Our imaginations play with this fact. The bare datum of rape engages us; we are not yet concerned to speculate on the agent. We can hear our sipped tea hiss on the hot plate of our imagination.

"Who did it, Nick?"

"I don't know. Maybe Denzil. It's the sort of trouble that that Mayor of Cro-Magnon has been heading for for years, the sort of climax I'd like to see him pinned on. As for the girl's being left unconscious on a barn floor, that in the context is a

technical trifle. Man's total thinking during those moments was not affected. Mabel is an element who was never really awake. A heat-vibration, that's all. They say she's still too sick with shock to make a statement. When the shock wears off she'll say what she'll say and Reynolds can take his chest in and march someone off to the County Keep."

Wilf looks sombre as Nick talks but he says that the thought of Denzil in arrows takes part of the great load from his spirit.

We walk back to Trelom, eat a tremendous lunch, with enough Yorkshire pudding on every plate to make a stallion comatose, and while we are dozing off at the sloping bottom of our camping-field, the Mabel Slater affair gives a few dramatic jolts. Wilf, Spence, Bosworth, Ted and I are lying down staring at the frothing surface of the stream beneath Mr. Mathews' nerve-testing bridges of rope. The stream seems to have doubled in volume and pace since the storm of the night before.

Then we see Mr. Rawlins, Mr. Langtrip and Reynolds the policeman, all looking as grave as executioners in normal countries, walking slowly towards us. Mr. Rawlins' face has resumed that shade of cream it wore when Reynolds made his first announcement.

"No, no," we hear him say and he seems to be on the point of hanging on to Mr. Langtrip for support. "My finest boy, as gentle and friendly a spirit as ever read a psalm. I refuse to believe it, officer. It's some malign lie. My ears cannot believe it."

They stop at some distance from us. Wilf, bemused and fascinated by the water-play beneath us, is not listening. Ted is stripping reeds. Only Spence and I have our ears stretched.

"But she says so, Mr. Rawlins. The girl herself says so. And the father confirms that the lad has shown a marked interest in her. Why should she lie? And her statement is specific. A tall lad, thin as a rake, she says. Wears a long bleached mac, she says. I'll have to question him."

"All right, then," says Mr. Rawlins. "But do it with care, with tact. He's as highly strung as a harp. The shock could

injure him. I won't have him injured. I couldn't think more of that boy if he were my own son."

He calls Wilf and they make their way towards Wilf's tent. We follow them. We see Wilf bring out his clothes and knapsack. Reynolds shakes his head and clucks as he unfolds the long bleached raincoat which we have come to regard as a trade mark for Wilf. Reynolds examines it and Wilf's other clothes as if for tell-tale marks. The pallor of a maturing panic is now spreading over Wilf's face.

"It's utterly absurd, officer," says Mr. Rawlins, "I would die to stake my belief in that boy's integrity. Since he came here he has been father, mother, brother to all his fellow-campers, my very right hand. He was here in the concert last night, I'm certain he was. I'm willing to swear that he was there and recited some Browning."

Reynolds looks baffled, as if there should be some regulation about reciting Browning.

"And he was the only one," goes on Mr. Rawlins, "who stayed at his post when the sudden flood rushed through the tents."

"Of course he was in the concert," says Spence who has now edged his way into the company outside Wilf's tent. "It was I who asked him to recite the Browning. I'm keen on that piece about the frog in the throat."

Reynolds waves his arms frowningly at Spence as if he thinks we are all now getting together to land him in a tangle.

"But I wasn't there, sir," says Wilf. "I didn't feel well after the explosion of all those traps. When the concert started I had a headache and I walked over to Dintle Bay. I came back a long time after dark."

"You see," says Reynolds. He turns to Spence. "It won't do you boys any good to obstruct justice. You and your frog! I'm only doing my duty. We've got to get to the bottom of this." He throws back his thick cape and shows his fine swell of body. "And I expect you to help me, sir," he says, turning suddenly around to Mr. Rawlins. "The girl may change her statement. But when she made it she seemed sure enough. And the father was emphatic too about his corroborative

evidence that the boy had eyed his daughter with great interest and desire during the time he and his companions were up at Chidelow's farm. Until we reach a definite conclusion we must regard the lad as under suspicion and we shall hold you responsible for his continued presence at camp."

Reynolds and Langtrip walk heavily from the field, with enough doom in their every step to satisfy even Ted Dolan's father. Wilf gives a short pathetic sickened cry, just a mist in front of his mouth, and plunges into his tent. We hear him throw himself down on the ground-sheet. His body must have touched the pole, for the whole tent trembles. We enter the tent and sit around, our minds moaning with sympathy and anger. We wait for Wilf to talk but there is no sign of life in him except for a twitching of the shoulders, the grimace of some elemental disgust and shame.

"Oh come on, Wilf," says Sam. "This is daftness. Rawlins is right. You'd never do a thing like this. This is some plot. The place is full of people who could have done this with real relish, people who wouldn't even have needed you to hold the stop-watch or hold open the door of the barn. Think of the way that Denzil glared up at the moon that night when the girl ran away from him. Ever since he set his eyes on that Mabel, rape has been a high priority with that element. Then there's that Vincent up at Chidelow's, a slow, torpid sort of voter but just the brand of boy to flick out his arm and flatten somebody if the fancy took him. Or Mathews the Moloch might have violated Mabel as a change from always violating the principles of Rousseau. Then there's old man Slater himself. Servility has hollowed that little voter as grubs would a potato. I bet he was outside the barn door taking fees and then consulting with the customers as to the poor goat who is to be given the blame. And who gets picked? Wilf, of all people."

Then there is a groan from Wilf but he keeps his face hidden from view. This development has caught him squarely on the back of the neck after years spent in getting him perfectly between the sights.

"Did you see somebody on the road to Dintle? Did you see

anybody who'd come forward and say that you were nowhere near Chidelow's?"

"There was no one. The world could have died, so empty were the roads."

"Are you sure it was to Dintle you went. You've got to be sure about this, Wilf. There are a lot of self-important bastards in this area who are going to take a lot of joy in hounding you because in their lives they will never have met anyone with less taste for biting back than you. But we'll bite for you. To do that, we've got to know that you are sure about what you say."

"I stood on the headland at Dintle. I watched the storm preparing to break. I remember that."

We all smile at one another, as if these words that Wilf has just spoken give us sanction to go out and tell Reynolds and Langtrip to stop talking through their helmet and tweed-hat respectively. I and Spence take Wilf by a shoulder each and start lifting him up. As he is straightening his body his face darkens and looks stupid. He pushes us away and leans his head against the tent pole.

"Or do I?" he asks.

"Do you what?"

"Do I remember being on Dintle headland?"

"You just said so. You never lie, Wilf. You are the boy who always keeps truth stretched to the full with use. And your story rings true. You know what a hunger you've got for poetry and solitude. What lonelier place than Dintle Head? What moment more charged with lyric promise than the birth-time of a storm?"

"I think I was there. I think I was there. Oh God, this is terrible, Sam."

"Why terrible?"

"What if I am now like one of those voters we've seen in dozens of pictures down at The Dog who get clouds over the brain and who go out and do murders and come back home for supper with no more thought of having done wrong than if they'd never been born."

We think of this. We do not blame Wilf for letting his mouth

droop at the startling appositeness of this suggestion. He is right about those films that we have seen. There has been a spate of these pictures starring amnesia and schizophrenia at The Dog lately. It is a long time since we saw anyone there who has committed a crime and got the full, old-fashioned flavour out of doing it. As they are being led away at the end they just smile and rub their heads as if to say that there is really no evil on the planet, only a bruised and slipping brain-cell here and there, to which there can be no answer, with which there can be no debate. Sam bridles.

"That's what goes on on the screen of The Dog and haven't we heard the boys in the Library and Institute denounce the manager of The Dog, Mr. Jaxley, dozens of times as an obscurantist pill for showing such demoralising stuff? All the voters we've seen doing harm so far in real places like Mynydd Coch have been as conscious, lucid and as little in need of the clinic as we are. When a man acts as a fiend or a plain nuisance he normally has a bagful of sound social reasons for doing so, and from the viewpoint of opportunism and selfishness he would be a fool to disregard those reasons. There's no cruelty or selfishness in you, Wilf. You'd rather die than stun even a worm, let alone a grown woman. And as for the scalding passion that puts conscience to sleep, you've got so little of it you'd get a job as porter in a harem any day."

"No, no. There's no way of telling, Sam. I told you I walked to Dintle. But I'm doubting that already. Those traps and the laughter of Dummock may have alienated me to start with. And when I began the walk to Dintle, the defences I usually employ against all thought of girls may have slipped down the sink and I might have walked, blind as an automaton, witlessly wicked as death, to the hillside where they found Mabel. In every man there are men, and when one of them goes out on a job the others bandage his eyes so that he will not see too clearly what he does, so that he will not come back with any fierce and uncomfortable rage in his heart. That's what I am, a kind of Jekyll and Hyde. As if it isn't bad enough being just one bloke in Mynydd Coch. The desire for that Mabel was planted in me that moment when she placed her buttocks,

as they call them, right up against the back of my head when she was pouring out the tea. Chidelow's hillside could have been Etna, honest. Normally I could have told the girl to keep her buttocks where they belonged and forgotten all about it in an hour. But Mathews and those other maniacs played me into the toppling nightmare atmosphere where schizophrenia thrives. Hyde lifted the latch and got elected to the council. Just think of that! Wilfred Harris, a monster, a bloody monster. I'm going to confess!"

He half-rises but Sam pushes him back. As he does so Mr. Rawlins comes into the tent. He stands for half a minute, looking grimly at us all, except Wilf. We can see that his mind has been through a wrestling conflict and that the finger of conviction is now pointing against Wilf. We can hear the syllables of Woe, Woe, singing through his head.

"Wilfred, Wilfred!" he says and in his every word there is a gloss of final and unimprovable anguish. He groans and Wilf groans and the tent feels like a catacomb with the grief glowing out of these two elements.

Mr. Rawlins leaves without another word.

"Wilf," says Sam very quietly, "all over the earth, out of the darkness caused by fear, greed, daftness, goblins crawl and bite their filthy initials in the flesh of man. This has been going on for so long, the darkness now is not even disturbed by the flames of a whole perishing world. The most that people do is to help the goblins with the spelling, for these goblins grow more ignorant and daring with every generation. A king goblin will demand that whole communities be delivered up to him. A landlord goblin will demand the cession of valleys, mountains and all sweet places. The dungbeetle goblin, Slater, as part of some sacrifice he wants to offer up on his lightless shrine in the hope of a bigger house and better pay, lays his claws on your good name and peace of mind. You are God's gift to the goblins, Wilf. If they ever sing it's out of thanks for you. But we're not anybody's gifts to anybody. We're going to set up a reception committee and if our aim is good there's going to be more than one elf of malice bothering the Medical Aid Committee for a truss. You stay here, Wilf. Rawlins wants you to

keep warm for the sacrifice. There's a voter who would really have been heartened and consoled by those heaps of skulls at Popocatepetl. There are still too many Aztecs knocking about on this globe, if you ask me. Come on, boys."

"Where are you off to, Sam? Slater's?"

"No, to Dintle, to see Nick."

CHAPTER XV

WE WAIT in Teilo Thadwald's for our friends. Sam is sanguine and serene. But for ourselves, we find that Wilf, even when terrified to within a few feet of the Black Meadow, is very persuasive. We have been too well conditioned by ten years of conscious film-seeing to dismiss as easily as Sam does the theory that some covert and deadly creature is lurking about inside Wilf waiting for the chance to lock up the Sunday School and go out to do ferocious deeds. Judging by the bland look on Ted Dolan's face he seems pleased to discover this new dark activity that has been revealed in Wilf and we feel that for two pins he would be out with the frank statement that it is a pity that brainstorms rob their victims of the chance of really appreciating what must be a lot of interesting experiences.

Nick comes in with Iolo, Peredur, Odo and Uncle Tude. Iolo and Peredur have been busy all day with some small mechanised units which have been made available to them for a demonstration of landmines which is going to be staged at the top of the glen on the following day. The mines, says Nick, have already been laid and he warns us to be prepared for some special bangs. Iolo and Peredur seem depressed by the day's work and they say that there will be no sweetness or calm in that glen again after such antics as they are now helping to promote.

Odo and Uncle Tude are in a poor way too. Their faces and hands are covered with cuts and their uniforms are pulled awry in a way which will anger Mathews the Moloch when he sees them. We tell them they look as if they have been pulled through a hedge backwards. When he hears that, Odo laughs in a slow tragic style that is hard to listen to.

"A hedge?" says Odo, in exactly the same tone but with less volume than an utterly betrayed tenor in opera. "We've been

through every hedge in this county, Tude and I, backwards, forwards, pushed and pulled."

Then, before we can start putting Wilf's case before them, he tells us the events of the day. They have been out on an exercise. The thing began on a wrong foot. The night before Uncle Tude had come to Odo with a tale of how Denzil Dummock had illustrated some deadly wrestling grip to the occupants of his tent, crooking his arm in the precise way that enables one to break a voter's head off without any untidy strands being left. Odo at first had seen nothing wrong in this. Then Uncle Tude had said that it was his head that had been inside the crook of Denzil's arm when the demonstration was being given and had it not been for a brusque warning to Denzil from one of the other boys in the tent Uncle Tude would now be walking about too short even for the Home Guard. Odo, after an hour's sentry-go on the side of the camp which faces out into open country and encourages meditation, came to the conclusion that Mathews the Moloch, as a comparatively enlightened man, should be told the full story of Denzil's habits in tents and out of them. So to Mathews Odo went with a reasoned case to back his claim that things would go better with Britain and the Home Guard if Denzil were dropped beneath the waters of the glen-stream and kept there. The Germans and the Japanese, charged Odo, would have to go through their ranks with a fine toothcomb to find a better-rounded oaf than Denzil. His argument made no effect at all on Mathews. The landlord had been having a glass of toddy with Mr. Langtrip and the two of them had been stoking each other up into a state of incandescent belligerency. Mathews had hailed Denzil as the splendid type of nerveless, acorn-eating Saxon this Island must have known before pacifism and the Celtic twilight had come along to dilute and make a pitiful swill out of the blood of Hereward the Wake. He denounced Odo as a premier diluter, a political Delilah who had his shears out and aimed at Denzil's virility, and Odo had to duck out of the tent just a breath ahead of Mathews' boot. The next morning Denzil assembled a squad including Odo and Uncle Tude. Mathews had told Denzil about Odo's mission of mercy

and given Denzil a free hand in deciding whether it would be one or two hand-grenades he wished to drop down Odo's neck. Every time Denzil passed the squad he stared at Odo's neck as if filing its measurements away in his mind for some urgent purpose. They set out on the exercise. This was to surround a troop of enemy invaders who were supposed to be in possession of Dintle Head. The Mynydd Coch boys were to advance through fields, shunning the roads. Denzil allowed the whole of the company to use any gates they found on the way, except Odo and Tude. These two, said Denzil, were the final reserve who had to get through, whatever happened to the rest. So for them there was to be nothing as frivolous, foolhardy or normal as standing up and going through natural gaps which were likely to be scrutinised by the enemy. No, Odo and Tude had to find the places where man and nature had worked together to make the finest obstacles. At those points they had to hack and crawl. Hours after Dintle Head had been cleared of the enemy and Denzil had quite forgotten about Odo and Tude over a pot in the private room of the Mariner's Arms, these two were painfully threading each other through every privet for miles around, being cut to pieces.

"It's no use even thinking bad things about a man like Denzil," says Odo. "At this moment he rides the universe as if it were a willing mule. From now on I cease to be critical. I renounce vindictiveness and worship only the simple arithmetic I do with the Clerk. I will flow in with the tide of stupid admiration that seems to be lapping at Denzil's feet. As far as that element is concerned, I'm doomed. Simple arithmetic. The simpler the better. If this world be a dark night then let those small and undeceiving sums of profit and loss be my night shirt. Denzil may be utterly foul, as you, Nick, seem to think he is. So is dung, but things grow at its touch."

"You're wise, boy," says Peredur. "Let us each sign a separate peace with foulness. The thing may be feeling as badgered as we do. Stroke it a little, and it may come at last to the small decent shape that most of us wear, may at last let us have a lifetime of peace."

"Remind me, Peredur," says Nick, "to give you boys a box of opium pills, the bumper size, for Christmas. Devil-worshippers, that's what you boys are fast becoming. You actually see foulness walking about outside your dwellings, as concrete and approachable as a brother. Foulness is our own trade union. There isn't one of us who isn't a paid-up member. It's kept going by dues paid in shavings from our own hearts and minds."

Teilo Thadwald's wife comes in and she clucks with pity at the sight of the deep scratches that run across the face of Uncle Tude.

"He's in a worse state than I am," says Odo. "He's a bit of a masochist, is Uncle Tude. After the second hedge drew a trickle of blood from his cheek, he refused to keep his head down and guard his face with his helmet. He shoved his face directly at the thorns. And on the way back I had to plead at the top of my voice with the poor sod whenever he got to a hedge that the exercise was over, that those aliens over at Dintle had been butchered, that there was no need to travel rabbit-style any more."

Teilo's wife takes Uncle Tude away to some distant kitchen for a coating of healing salve.

"I'm glad he's gone," says Sam.

"Oh he doesn't look as bad as that," says Odo.

"I'm not thinking about his look. He's Wilf's uncle. He's fond of Wilf. They hang from the same trembling stem. But Wilf's in trouble, and I want to see if we can get him out of it before breaking the news to Uncle Tude or to anybody except you boys."

"Trouble? What is this, Sam?"

Sam tells them and we can see from the shadow that drops over the faces of his listeners that they take a serious view of Wilf's plight.

"What does Wilf himself say?"

"He says the story's false, that he was on a walk to Dintle Head when the thing was supposed to have happened. But you know what sort of a mind Wilf has. When we left him he had convinced himself that he is some kind of Jekyll and Hyde,

an apprentice schizophrenic who has some brand of rapist within him waiting to be let off the leash."

"He may be right," says Odo solemnly. "We all get these unaccountable impulses. If I hadn't been taking that nerve fortifier, Skullcap, for the last five years, God knows what would have been going on on the further side of my moon. I've smelled blood on more than one of my thoughts. But one sip of that Skullcap and Hyde goes on the National Health."

"Poor old Wilfred," says Iolo, looking sadly into his empty cordial-glass. "It proves the point that Peredur and I have been making for years. Under the pressure of privations and deceits even the firmest mind will crack into fragments. Wilf is now getting the dividends from invested generations of repressed and laborious dolts in places like Mynydd Coch."

"You really think he did this!" asks Nick and looks at his friends disgustedly. "So that's all the help a man can expect from his friends when they turn out to be a pack of escapists. If ever you boys hear a sound of banging that's a lot closer than usual, don't worry about it. It'll be the manias of this age pinning your mental scalps to the wall."

"Oh for God's sake, Nick, be reasonable. You know what an unstable rapturous sort of kid Wilf has always been, exalted whenever he talks about poetry and religion. He was bound to go off like a match when drawn across a maiden like this Mabel who goes about at the heat of a charged furnace. I'm sorry he had to be so clumsy and get himself in trouble but we've got to learn to be detached about these things. There's nothing as simple as class divisions left in this country any more. Now we're dealing with fissures of temperament and Wilf appears to be on the other side of a fissure. We can signal our good wishes over to him but what else do you expect us to do? Jump after him? This is the puritan conscience getting its limbs free after a hell of a long cramp and it's nowhere near as skilled as that voter Houdini."

"Never mind about those," says Nick, jerking his finger at Iolo and Peredur and turning to us. "They're down in an odd warren. They'll come back to the light when they find the entrance being blocked up. Now then, Sam, you've got a fine

nose for evil; what's beating at the heart of this problem? Who'd want Wilf dipped into disgrace? Has he any enemies?"

"No one. No enemy at all. He'd cut his arm off for anybody. But evil there is. What do you know about Slater, Mabel's old man?"

"As much as you do. He's a cellar-product, pure fungus. He'd stick a pitchfork into anybody to get a penny's advantage and put them over the rick for twopence. He was a blackleg in two or three strikes when he lived at Mynydd Coch. If he had anything to gain from putting blame falsely on Wilf, then I'd say that's the answer."

"Somebody did it who's promised Slater something if he either keeps his mouth shut or opens it to name someone who is quite innocent. He's got Mabel to back him up. She's only got one thing on her mind and the truth isn't it."

"Perhaps. We can guess these things. But Slater and his sort live in a peculiar world and it would be hard to get a hold if you tried to get your arms around him to squeeze out a little decency. Have you got any ideas as to who might have fallen on Mabel in the barn?"

"Anybody. Her favours are an open bazaar."

"But you've got somebody at the back of your mind."

"Yes, I have. We all have, I suppose. Denzil."

"M-m. That night in the lane, we all saw him and I've never seen a human being give out such steam."

"There they are now," says Odo, half rising from his seat.

"Who?"

"Denzil and Slater."

We all look out on to the road over the half-curtain of lace which runs across the window. Denzil and Slater are walking across the square. Denzil, as always, is looking truculent and replete. Slater is looking uneasy and furtive and keeps close to Denzil's great body as if for assurance and safety.

"There's some secret between those two," says Sam. "You could smell it from any distance."

"It's a secret that's been between such men since time began," says Nick.

"And you're right about the smell. Are they coming in here?"

"Looks as if they are going back to Trelom."

"I think you're right about this, Sam. Denzil probably did the assault and he's worked out some way of making it worthwhile for Slater and Mabel not to point him out. But why the hell they should have chosen to name so innocent a faun as Wilf as their scapegoat I don't know. Even in the kind of drain where Denzil and Slater are carving their particular niche, there are probably hints of careless artistry. This is one of them, senseless but ornamental. There's only one thing to do."

"What's that?" ask Odo and Peredur. Their voices are shaking, their manner reluctant.

"As long as Slater's got Denzil's shadow to crouch in he'll stick to what he has said and Wilf will suffer because that element will plead guilty just to oblige the policemen and prevent their feeling inept. We've got to get Slater away from Denzil and then give him such a fright his whole front will yawn open and the truth will slip out by accident or otherwise."

"You can do it without us," says Iolo loudly, and firmly for a man whom we have always known to live in such a minor and accommodating key.

"Why, Iolo?"

"Because I don't see why this Slater should lie about an injury sustained by his only daughter. Like that man from the University Extension said at the Library and Institute, you're dangling in a noose of absolutes, Nick. You're high noon, Slater's midnight. So you think. Nothing could be so dramatic and true at the same time. If he had put all his glands through the mangle they wouldn't be as dry of the juices of normal feeling as you make out. And I don't see why Wilf, nice lad as he is, shouldn't have found some banana-skin in his mind to slip on. Among all the planets, standing upright all the time must be the damndest hobby ever thought of."

"Be frank, Iolo. What you mean is you don't give a rap what happens to anybody else as long as you're not bothered."

"That's near the mark. Look, Nick, you know what kind of lives Peredur and I have lived. Sick and out of luck most of the time. The only part of our desires we've seen steadily is the rear end. You know we've got a plan to find a small farm

that we can work together. Yesterday we had a chat with Mathews the Moloch. He has a lot of land along this strip of the coast. He's promised to help us get a suitable cottage and small-holding."

"All right, all right. Go feudal if you will. But what has all this talk of cottages and land to do with Wilf?"

"If we harm Slater in any way Denzil will take it out on us. You heard what Odo said. Denzil is beloved of Mathews. We can't risk having our plans ruined for a trifle like this."

"A trifle? Those roundheads must have played the bear with your moral sense when they came after you in that matter of Sophia."

"We want to be left alone. That may sound like a baby-cry to you, Nick, but we mean it. We don't want to be a target for you, the roundheads or Denzil. That's not asking much, is it?"

"What about you, Odo? Would you try to get Slater away from Denzil?"

"Have a care, Nick. I think the world of young Wilf and I'd do anything for him. But what perverse imp is it that keeps people suggesting things for me to do that have Denzil Dummock hanging from the back like a tail? I've had a patchy and peaceless time of it on this earth. I'm sorry I ever put on this uniform. I'm sorry the look of censure in my old man's eyes ever goaded me into this tomfoolery of discipline, hate and conflict. I'm all right with figures. Why in God's name can't I be left alone in a paradise of totals? Once I feel out for the flesh behind the figure I am a blind and clownish stranger, making every man on earth a proud and strutting advertisement of my helplessness."

"I feel mildewed," says Nick. "Honest to God, mildewed. How many centuries do we think we are going to live that we need such great barns of hollowness for our harvest of denials and rejections? All right, you've been scooped out, gutted. Nothing stirs any more where ten, twenty years ago there was abounding life. Shavings of minds and hearts, so thin that we don't even miss them at the time. Cowardice is a licensed refuge. You take your tickets and cower down together.

There's nothing over you really to keep away whatever it is that turns your thoughts green and the only ones who get deliverance are the boys in the bottom layer who are stifled. A refuge from what? From Denzil, who gets bigger and sharper-toothed with every glimpse he gets of your petrified buttocks? There is no refuge. The things silence must think of the ways we have of passing it on! Go on, turn out the lights inside yourselves. Men and women with a glow of defiant pride in them are going to have a pretty thin time of it in this epoch anyway. Find your refuge, crawl into your mouldy cottage which Mathews will probably take care to locate on the globe's deepest marsh with special suction appliances for regressive proletarians. You remember what these lads told us about the farmer Chidelow. He stroked the impulse to preach inside the darkness of himself for years on end. The thing gets rigid and passionate and in a way to spout its fire. A German idiot passing above kippers the conventicle where Chidelow has planned his ascension. That's more than a fluke. There's only one refuge for people who've seen and known the things we have. It's got to be built on a strong and angry understanding, a wish to be less pitiable and ridiculous by far. Run away from one Denzil today and you run into his big brother tomorrow. They abound because we feed them, lift the fodder to their filthy mouths with our own mutilated hands."

"Sorry, Nick. Didn't want to upset you, but . . ."

"I'm not upset. Every age has its excuses. This may be a trifle, as you say. From the corpse's viewpoint, so's the universe. When your particular idiot drops your particular bomb, come back and we'll argue about it."

Uncle Tude comes in. Mrs. Thadwald has doctored his cuts well. She has almost hidden his face in a network of elastoplast. She is grinning at Tude as if he represents some bit of prize handicraft.

"I had a fresh box of those bandages in yesterday. Wasn't that lucky?" she says and we do not have to wait for her to say that after this job of making Tude look like a mummy from the collar up she will need a new box tomorrow.

Tude sits there, silent, an emblem of trussed and battered

frustration. Peredur and Iolo stare at him with a sidelong, shamefaced compassion.

"All right, Nick," says Peredur. "You tell us what to do. We ought to do something for Wilf."

"What about you, Odo?"

"Issue your orders, Nick. This is the afternoon and Denzil my Miura bull. My death-policies are stuck behind my old man's pipe-rack and I want my two stiff white collars with phrases of wonder and protest pencilled all around to be handed over to the Clerk to the Council, my master."

CHAPTER XVI

WE RETURN to Trelom. Mr. Rawlins is still busying himself in the village hall. We help him with the job of tidying up the kitchen from which the wet clothes have now been removed. We leave Nick and his friends at the end of the lane. Nick is pensive and still devising a scheme which will put Mr. Slater through the wringer and bring to a foam at his lips his tiny residue of truth. We see Denzil sitting on the stone stile which is let into the wall that fronts the churchyard. Mr. Slater is at his side and they are engaged in quiet, confidential talk.

Mr. Rawlins thanks us for our help. We say nothing to him for we are all too preoccupied with Wilf's dilemma to allow our usual easy exchange of banalities. At this height of drama the air is rare. Mr. Rawlins' sadness has become almost tranquil, as if the very extremity of the shock he has sustained has secreted a certain power to heal the general jumpiness he shows in his broad dealings with mankind. He calls on Gomer Jones and surprises Gomer, by asking him in a tone like syrup to make us all a rich cup of cocoa apiece. Gomer obeys and we all sit around the freshly scrubbed table of the kitchen trying to get our spoons through the cocoa and wondering what Gomer means by richness. From where he sits Mr. Rawlins can look through a small window which gives a view of the beeches and elm trees which fringe the garden of the Langtrips. He sighs.

"One knows a little peace," he says, "but even as it is being made the perforations are being let in which will give the appointed destroyer an easier time in tearing it to bits. Mr. and Mrs. Langtrip will never be the same again after the utter grossness of this scandal. They will be mortified that we should have intruded here only to shatter the calm of their lovely valley."

Sam glances across at Mr. Rawlins and begins to say that in his field of brooding there is not even the trace of concern for

the squire but a simple animal loyalty fills his mind with thoughts of Wilf and only Wilf. Mr. Rawlins gives Sam a sharp look back but decides that his nerves have had enough of a filing for one day and he tilts up his cup waiting patiently for the mass to start passing through his lips.

Dusk yellows, thickens and presses. Hugo Bateman in the hall has just lifted a piano accordion from a colossal box. His parents have just bought this instrument and had it sent on to Hugo for his birthday. We think of the problem of Hugo's birth as he draws great bands of dissonance across the dusty stillness of the hall, delighting the score or so lads who are sitting around him and who are congratulating Hugo on getting any sound at all from so unwieldy a contraption.

As dark comes on we slip out to the crossroad. Nick has his plan ready. Ted Dolan, who has a bluff, plausible way with him, goes up to Denzil and says that Mr. Langtrip would like to see him. He is to go around the back way and knock hard because the main gates have been locked and the servant is away. Denzil marches off to the back door of the manor, seemingly pleased with himself, whistling and shouting to Slater that he will be back shortly. Ted returns to our side and says that when he broke in on their talk Denzil was discussing with Slater a trip they were arranging to the house of some women of stone age morals in the village.

Slater begins walking restlessly up and down the road in front of the village hall. Nick, Iolo and Peredur, escorted by us, close in on him. Nick tells Slater that he is among friends and that it would be silly of him to shout any sort of alarm to Denzil. We make our way along the path that flanks the church towards the glen. We push Slater through the barbed wire that encloses the officially earmarked practice-area. We make for those tall, frightening structures along which we have seen so many of our friends sway and topple. Slater is terrified and begins to shake when he sees that there is some connection between this grim, silent tour and the bridges.

"What in hell's name do you silly sods want with me?" he asks and there is such urgency and anguish in his voice we young ones feel that he deserves at least a quick answer.

"The truth about Mabel," says Nick. "You made that up about Wilf, didn't you? He's innocent, isn't he? He never touched her. Who are you trying to shield, Slater? Come on, out with it."

"It was him, the thin kid. Mabel told me, she swore to it. The one who was cutting the twine for the barley sheaves up at Chidelow's, she said, the one who walks about the village wearing a long white mac and a face like a preacher. He jumped on her there in the barn. Like an animal, he was, she said. He'll do time for this, the young swine."

"Stop reciting, Slater. We'll see if you stick to that story as the night wears on."

"What are you up to? What have you chaps got against me?"

"Nothing much. We are delegates from the Mynydd Coch Human Rights Association. We've sworn to bring back fairness and equity dead or alive. Up that ladder, boy."

"Not up there! Not up there! I'm a poor one for heights, honest to God. You'll be getting into trouble for this. I know you all, I'll recognise you all."

Iolo and Peredur force Slater up towards the perpendicular ropes. He looks desperate and ill and we can see that if he really is shielding someone then he must be doing so out of a considerable sense of love or greed. My bowels feel suddenly relaxed and full of hymnal wambles, disquietingly fugal, as the thought strikes me that Slater might have said nothing but the truth. That rope bridge, many feet above a swift and deadly stream, is no place for a middle-aged voter who gets giddy with ease to be walking on in the dark. But Nick who seems to know to the last inch where he is walking sounds remorseless.

"Get on with it."

Slater takes one look downward at the creaming torrent and at that exact moment Ted, at a signal from Nick, blows a record blast on his trumpet. Slater gasps as if he thinks this is what all our slumps and wars have been leading up to, the last black climax, and he collapses into Peredur's arms. They all come down. We lay Slater against a tree and splash him with

water. He is a long time recovering. When he does so, his teeth are chattering and he appears to have little control over his lips. We encourage and calm him. He tells his story. The man who assaulted Mabel was Mr. Chidelow. Mabel had recognised him quite clearly. But Slater had told her to say nothing of this because he was after Prysor Pratt's job and cottage on Chidelow's farm and thought he could obtain them by casting blame on someone else and extracting a reward for his silence from Chidelow. Slater begins to cry but it is weeping that has nothing to do with sorrow. We all stare down at his plain, pallid face. We find this man and all his motives inscrutable. Nick touches me on the shoulder.

"Slip up to the village and see how Odo is getting on."

"What's Odo's task?"

"He's to distract Denzil, get him to chase him along the road to Dintle, get him away from Slater. There's some kind of pact between those two."

I run up through the field. I pause by Wilfred's tent and look in. He is sitting on a canvas camp stool looking like Rodin's thinker but weaker and more against thought. I shout in a few smiling words to lift part of the melancholy from him.

"Cheer up, Wilf. Everything's all right. You're no fiend. You're no Hyde. Your psyche is as virgin as you are. There's no split at all. You said you went to Dintle. To Dintle you went."

He does not seem to understand all I say and I realise that his mind must still be swathed in about six layers of palsy. So I leave the full unfolding of the news until he has grown more lucid. As I approach the village hall I see Mr. Rawlins moving with the rapid stealth of a sheepdog back and forth across the yard behind the building. He has his hand cupped over his ear and his face is wearing a fine new edition of the festering astonishment which is the look he normally gives the world.

"I heard a bugle, a trumpet," he says, standing still for an instant to give me this news. "A great blast. It's that young madman, Dolan. I should have sent him packing the moment he revealed to me the unhinged beliefs he holds about the

earth's orthcoming doom. With that boy at large and free to bugle at will, doom is not forthcoming. It is here. What is he up to? Where is he. Bring him out, bring him out."

"It's a new way of fishing," I say, bending forward and speaking directly into the hand that Mr. Rawlins still has cupped over his ear, as if he only is supposed to know this about Ted.

"Fishing? Bury these jests, boy. Life, tonight most of all, is earnest."

"He blows the fish out. It's illegal but interesting."

I leave Mr. Rawlins who begins once more his movement up and down the yard. As I come out into the lane, Denzil is leaving the back of the Langtrip home and is muttering angrily to himself as if wondering who can have sent him on such a fool's errand. Odo is now sitting on the stone stile where Denzil left Slater. I slip up to Odo and tell him in a whisper of what we have just discovered from Slater.

Denzil snarls at the sight of Odo and I can see he thinks Odo as good a target as any for working off his annoyance.

"Now then, you eunuch, get out of my way or you'll have another bellyful of what you had this morning. You and that other phantom, Tude. Where's that chap who was here with me? That chap Slater. Where did he go?"

"Gone, Dummock," says Odo, standing up and speaking in a voice which is pitched on much too high a key, but firm none the less. "Gone to where you and all other murderous louts like you and he belong. To the devil."

"Well, well!" says Denzil, in a thick pleased tone that has to my senses the colour and quality of tomato chutney. "I don't like you, Montgomery. You are like too many other thin clever-minded little bastards who've tried to take a rise out of me. That little sod Price is another. I'm bigger and cleverer than you all. I've got on, haven't I? I'll see you all mouldering, you bloody crawlers, you sodden nits. Did you think I was rough with you before? Watch me now, boy."

I charge Denzil from the side, using some hints from the shadier side of Rugby. This gives Odo the chance to vault over the churchyard stile. Denzil recovers his balance in a few

seconds and gives me an instant clout that sets up a chime between my ears louder than St. Peter's. I sway for a whole minute full of daze and peals. I see Odo plunging through the maze of gravestones, then he seems to rise as smoothly as Springheeled Jack over the back wall of the churchyard and it is clear from his speed that all the four engines of his terror are going full out. He races down towards the glen. I bawl to him as loudly as I can with the print of Denzil's knuckles still an inch deep in the side of my head that he is taking the wrong route, that, according to Nick's strategy, he should now be haring off to Dintle with a tricked Denzil behind him. Denzil is certainly behind him, about six inches behind if Odo's squeals of dread from out of the gloom are any guide, but he is not bound for Dintle. He is heading like a bird for the top part of the glen. I remember what Nick said about the laying of mines in that quarter and there is real agony in my mind as I raise my voice for a final effort.

"Odo, Odo! Come back!"

My shoulder is grasped. Mr. Rawlins, his face twitching with annoyance, is calling me to order and demanding an account.

"What game is this?" he asks. He is almost singing with rage. Mr. Rawlins has done a lot of oratorio work in his time and there is a strong element of recitative in his moments of highest indignation. "First, Wilf is charged with a loathsome crime. Then Dolan deafens the whole village with that note of his down in the glen." He has pulled me into the yard of the village hall for greater privacy and we are standing in the gaunt shadow of the zincs which protect the stoves from rain. "Now you stand there and shout and wail while relays of men go running like leprechauns through the graveyard. Am I being troubled in my mind or are these things really going on?"

I am wondering how to answer that when there is a violent explosion from the glen. It shakes the village to its roots. The whole structure of zincs above us is shattered and Mr. Rawlins and I seem to be blown to safety by the wind of their fall. He throws himself into my arms and I have all the work in the

world to keep upright, between the shock and the load of him.

"Good God," he says. "This is the end, the end."

I lean him against the wall and run towards the glen. I make for the spot at which I left Nick and his friends. There is no sign of them near the bridges where I left them. Further up the stream I can see the wispy remnants of the smoke caused by the bang. I walk cautiously towards it. Then out from it, stepping into a moony patch, come my friends, Odo blanched and speechless between them. Odo is trying to talk to them but all he manages is a kind of peal of addled laughter and we can see that he is more than half-crazed. Nick forces him to sit on the grass bank and rubs his temples. Nick says that this is supposed to be good for shock but we do not hear Odo talking any more or laughing less for all the loving rub of Nick's fingers about his head. It is Iolo with his cool, mossy, affectionate voice who stills whatever storm is raging inside Odo.

"Denzil?" he asks.

"Dead." The word is as full of freshly minted wonder as man's first.

We walk away from the glen, towards the camp. We can hear dozens of feet running over grass in our direction. Mr. Rawlins is in the van.

"Dummock," says Nick, trying to answer the first fifty of Mr. Rawlins' questions. "He was out to murder Odo Montgomery and he ran into the little minefield. We think he's dead."

"God, God," says Mr. Rawlins. "Flood, fire, rape, petards. Is there no end to this?"

Mr. Slater slips away from us in the confusion. Nick, Iolo and Peredur scatter to look for him. We take Odo into the anteroom of the village hall. We give him the strongest cup of tea that Mrs. Willis can brew. As he sits there drinking it we can see it will be hours before we can expect him to provide the materials for a discussion, so we go into the hall. Hugo Bateman is still playing his accordion and the other boys are still grouped around him. We can understand why they seem so little bothered by the explosion. In terms of volume this

instrument of Hugo's belongs to the third world war. They are singing soft harmonious songs like 'When your Hair has turned to Silver' and they are all looking cosily witless about it. We urge them to keep the items on this plane because Mr. Rawlins is going to need a headful of these soothing harmonies if he is to sleep after the day's events. Near the group is sitting Mr. Chidelow. He is watching the lads with a frank warm affection and in his eyes there is a hint of more stable contentment than we have seen in them before.

We gesture to him conspiratorially and with a smile of apology to Hugo Bateman he leaves the group and comes outside with us. We walk up the road and leave Sam to do the talking.

"We know now, Mr. Chidelow. We're sorry. But we think we understand a bit about these things. We got hold of Slater and he told us the truth. But we won't say anything. You've been very nice to us, and that Mabel was a bitch."

We all stop, mainly for Mr. Chidelow's sake. His breath is heavy although he is smiling broadly at us. We look down at the village hall and watch the play of its badly concealed lights upon the marbles of the graveyard.

"You boys have done me a great amount of good," says Mr. Chidelow. "One day I was bound to go off with a violent loudness like that thing in the glen a few minutes ago. How or when was not important. I wish the manner of it could have been more noble, splendid, thoughtful. But, as I say, the details in these matters are not important. There is a stone; one pushes it away. There is silence; one breaks it. There is a waking shame; one puts it to sleep. Life smites at one with a face smugly replete, and magically in one's hand one finds the knife to slash at the face. No, it was the danger of making a botched compromise that brought me near to disaster. Slater came to me this afternoon. I could have bought his silence for ever and ever and for much less than he asked. Our Slaters are the sum total of all our gangrenes. I could have bought his peace and lived on, for all the world as if those stupid moments in the barn were not rooted in every one of the years I've lived. I wished to talk about myself. That was all. That's the root,

that's the flower. A shy, secluded man wanted to talk about himself, about his desires, the one field he never had the skill to plough. This evening I went down to the chapel. Even as I approached it seemed alien, insignificant. The storms have brought down one of the toppling walls and finished off the job of destroying the pulpit. That upset me and drove me for some minutes to clutch once again at the blessing of silence, my deep and dearly laboured death. On my way back I met Reynolds, the policeman. He told me about Wilfred, your friend, the one with whom I have had so many nice talks about the mercy of God. It made me sick, that, the thought of myself, the heat of my escaping dreams slipping like lava, grey killing lava, over others. I sat down in the hall, listening to the boys sing. I was assured, my mood of wanting to talk frankly and openly about myself restored. When the soil of me has been ripped wide gaping open by punishment, who knows what might grow? Is anyone or anything ever fertilised without pain and loss? There's Reynolds now."

He leaves us and walks towards the dark form of the policeman who has just passed us.

"But Mr. Chidelow," says Sam in a desperate, whispering voice. "There's no need to say you did it. Say it was Denzil, Denzil Dummock. Denzil is dead. Nobody'll know."

"No one is ever dead," says Mr. Chidelow. "And at bottom there is no one who does not know." Mr. Chidelow says this in a magnificently sad and booming tone and we think that this must be one of the most satisfactory moments in his life. It is certainly one of the most impressive things we have ever heard in all our days. It beats even Wilf giving up his neck as Sydney Carton in 'The Only Way' which we put on at school a year ago. We could weep for the fullness of this moment, with Chidelow there pronouncing his own doom in a voice like an Eisteddfod winner and the moon playing in pagan delight with the monumental marbles of the churchyard.

"A dreadful thing down below," says Reynolds to Mr. Chidelow. "Down there in the glen. Only a few minutes ago Slater came to see me in great distress. Said his daughter was mistaken. The man responsible was Dummock. A Home

Guard Sergeant. And now this very Dummock gets himself blown to fragments by a buried mine."

"Dummock?" says Mr. Chidelow. His voice is ordinary now; it has lost its sheen of glory. "I think I recall him. He had an over-assertive look. Overshot the mark, even for a soldier, I always thought. Walked into the mine-field deliberately, probably. Of course it was foolish that you should ever have suspected that lad Wilfred. Beautiful character. A scholar of real promise. It must have been an awful strain for the girl's father too, the man Slater. Good worker. Deserves something better than he's had. Glad to hear that he went to see you. Must see what I can do for him, must . . ."

We stare after the solid shapes of the constable and Mr. Chidelow as they mutter off into the gloom.

When we get back into the anteroom Mr. Rawlins is shaking Wilf tensely by the hand, beaming stern congratulations into Wilf's eye. Then Mr. Rawlins goes in and tells the boys quite tenderly that this has been a long day, that they must now sing their last song, and it had better be on a more reverent note. Gomer Jones unsheaths his satin voice and leads us in 'Now the Day is Over, Night is Drawing Nigh,' and there is wonderful fitness of face, voice, harmony among the whole group of us as we stand around Hugo in the ill-lit hall. Even when we finish the last verse, Wilf, in a fervid tremolo launches again into the refrain and gladly we join him, doffing our caps in brief truce to the need for a primal simplicity.

Mr. Rawlins stands by the piano. There is something on the verge of loving thankfulness on his face as he looks at us. Our voices grow louder. We pray that to the obdurate minds of all men there shall come a mood of yielding, easement and rest. We wish that, for Mr. Rawlins who has hovered with too much fuss and fury over his definition of happiness, for Mr. Chidelow who will always be too shy and sidling ever to define, and for Denzil down in the glen who is no longer bothered.

We walk out as silence falls on the hall. The moon is high now. Peace has come back to the valley, but it is the familiar, imperfect, precarious peace which we have always known. The glorious tranquillity we thought we glimpsed is revealed

now as having been an intimation and a longing only. We glance up to the hillside on which rests the farm of Mr. Chide-low. Across the great stretch of blue quiet air which joins mountain to mountain are drawn the streaks of patient folly.

